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FINNEGAN, HENDERSON, FARABOW, GARRETT & DUNNER, L.L.P.
1300 I STREET, N. W.
WASHINGTON, DC 20005-3315

202 • 408 • 4000
FACSIMILE 202 • 408 • 4400

ATLANTA
404•653•6400
PALO ALTO
650•849•6600

WRITER'S DIRECT DIAL NUMBER:
(202) 408-4130

TOKYO
011•813•3431•6943
BRUSSELS
011•322•646•0353

JC863 U.S. PTO
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06/30/00

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ATTORNEY DOCKET NO. 07704.0006

Box PATENT APPLICATION
Assistant Commissioner for Patents
Washington, D.C. 20231

Re: New U.S. Patent Application
Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR GENERATING A SALE OFFER TO SELECTED INDIVIDUALS OVER ELECTRONIC NETWORK SYSTEMS
Inventor: Luigi FORLAI

Sir:

We enclose the following papers for filing in the United States Patent and Trademark Office in connection with the above patent application.

1. Application - 66 pages, including 7 independent claims and 25 claims total.

2. Drawings - 30 sheets of informal drawings (Figures 1-24C).

3. A check for $1,092.00 representing a $690.00 filing fee and $402.00 for additional claims.

Applicant claims the right to priority based on Provisional Patent Application No. 60/141,284, filed June 30, 1999.

This application is being filed under the provisions of 37 C.F.R. § 1.53(f). Applicant awaits notification from the Patent and Trademark Office of the time set for filing the Declaration.

Please accord this application a serial number and filing date.

The Commissioner is hereby authorized to charge any additional filing fees due and any other fees due under 37 C.F.R. § 1.16 or § 1.17 during the pendency of this application to our Deposit Account No. 06-0916.

Respectfully submitted,

FINNEGAN, HENDERSON, FARABOW,
GARRETT & DUNNER, L.L.P.

By: _____
Robert F. Rotella
Reg. No. 24,014

RFR:pln
Enclosures

Attorney Docket No. 07704.0006-00

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION

OF

LUIGI FORLAI

FOR

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR GENERATING A SALE OFFER TO SELECTED INDIVIDUALS OVER ELECTRONIC NETWORK SYSTEMS

LAW OFFICES
NEGAN, HENDERSON,
ARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
HINGTON, DC 20005
202-408-4000

TITLE OF THE INVENTION

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR GENERATING A SALE OFFER TO SELECTED INDIVIDUALS OVER ELECTRONIC NETWORK SYSTEMS

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is related to and claims priority from U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/141,284, entitled "Method and Apparatus for Generating a Sale Offer Over an Electronic Network System," and filed on June 30, 1999. The disclosure of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/141,284 is expressly incorporated herein by reference in its entirety and relied upon.

This application is being filed concurrently with U.S. Patent Application Serial No. _____, entitled "Method and Apparatus for Generating a Sale Offer Over an Electronic Network System" of Luigi Forlai, the entire contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference and relied upon.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

I. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to electronic sale systems and related methods. More particularly, the invention relates to electronic sale systems and methods in which a sale offer is communicated from a seller to selected individuals through an electronic network system or environment in which a number of sellers provide sale offers.

II. Description of the Related Art

The development of the Internet has brought about a profound effect on price competition for goods and services in the global marketplace. Web sites on the Internet, such as Amazon.com and CDNow.com, sell goods at prices

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NEGAN, HENDERSON,
ARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
SHINGTON, DC 20005
202-408-4000

substantially less than conventional distributors who typically employ printed advertisements to attract customers. These sites have been able to do so by utilizing the global reach of the Internet to expand the relevant sales market beyond the local market reached by printed advertising methods. Moreover, the start up costs of setting up an Web site are either less than or at least comparable to the start up costs associated with conventional sales methods. Accordingly, Web sites have been able to transfer cost savings to the consumer in the form of substantially reduced prices.

Other Web sites have also attempted to further reduces prices. For example, Buy.com has been able to sell software and other goods at below cost prices by recouping the losses through advertising revenue generated over the site itself. Moreover, FreePC.com has allowed consumers to receive free personal computers on the condition that the consumers provide personal data, which could be sold to advertisers. However, many of these endeavors collapse when the cost of procuring such goods outweighs the advertising revenue generated.

In general, conventional buyer-seller transactions are seller-driven in the sense that they focus on the methods or processes available to the seller. Typically, electronic sales systems involve sellers utilizing various electronic advertising media in order to attract potential buyers and, in some cases, to complete sales transactions. With an electronic sales system it is possible to reach more potential buyers than with other conventional sale methods (e.g., printed advertising). Electronic sales systems, however, suffer from the same

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NEGAN, HENDERSON,
ARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
SHINGTON, DC 20005
202-408-4000

drawbacks of conventional sales methods in that the seller normally absorbs the risk and cost of advertising. That is, the advertising cost associated with the transaction and the attendant risk that such advertising will be unsuccessful fall directly upon the seller. As a result, the offered cost of a product will normally include not only the cost of manufacturing the product and the seller's anticipated profit, but also the cost of advertising the product. Similar problems and associated risk exist when a seller offers services.

Accordingly, there is a need for an improved method and apparatus for offering goods and services, including within electronic sales systems, to reduce the risk placed on a seller. There is also a need for an improved method and apparatus for advertising goods and services, and reaching more buyers in a fast and economical fashion. Still further, there is a need to provide an improved method and apparatus for automatically and intelligently directing sale offers to a group of selected individuals who have registered as potential buyers from among a larger number of other visitors connected to an electronic sales system in order to increase the likelihood of acceptance of the sale offer.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In concurrently-filed U.S. Patent Application Serial No. _____, entitled "Method and Apparatus for Generating a Sale Offer Over an Electronic Network System" of Luigi Forlai, electronic sale systems and methods are disclosed in which a sale offer is communicated from a seller to a buyer through an electronic network system or environment. A sale offer is electronically presented to a buyer through a Web site or electronic network at a substantially discounted price or for "free" (i.e., for free or at a price near zero,

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ARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
SHINGTON, DC 20005
202-408-4000

plus delivery charges-if applicable) for a very limited amount of time. In the embodiment disclosed therein, any persons who happen to be visiting a particular Web site at a certain point in time – the "minute" – will receive an offer for a virtually free good. This minute (referred to hereinafter as a "Happy Minute®") will appear on a random basis during the day, so that the consumer does not know when the Happy Minute® starts. As a result, consumers have an incentive to stay on that particular Web site.

The present patent application is directed to an embodiment in which the concept of offering consumers an opportunity or offer to receive a product or service at virtually no cost is preserved. However, in the embodiment described herein, interested Web surfers are provided with the opportunity to register with a central Web site (referred to herein as the "administrator"). Registration allows users to receive offers not just from the particular Web site they are visiting at a certain point in time, but from any other site which is associated with the administrator site. Registrants who happen to be visiting any one of the associated Web sites during issuance of a Happy Minute® will receive an offer on condition that they be visiting a Web site belonging to the Happy Minute Network

Such registrants have a advantage because they are aware of all the sites that offer a Happy Minute opportunity and they can choose which among all the sites better suits their needs. For example, let 's say a surfer is interested in winning a CD Player and only 3 sites offer them. The surfer knows which sites are offering CD Players and they will browse among those sites. In other words,

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NEGAN, HENDERSON,
ARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
SHINGTON, DC 20005
202-408-4000

potential buyers receive a sale offer only if they are currently visiting the site that is emitting the sale offer itself. They register with the Happy Minute Network to inform the administrator that they want to receive sale offers and to obtain the support software – the plug-in – which allows them to be informed about what sites offers what and other kind of information about the Happy Minute Network).

Accordingly, the opportunity for a Web surfer to receive an offer is greatly enhanced by means of the plug-in which continually informs them about which sites will be offering what goods or services; without the plug-in they would only receive sale offers from the site that they are currently surfing. Obviously, the plug-in doesn't inform them about *when* sale offers are to be generated.

The present invention breaks the traditional structural barriers normally existing between the marketing function and the selling function of an industrial or commercial enterprise. The invention also breaks the division between advertising (i.e., contacts, impressions, etc.) and selling goods (i.e. video cameras, shoes, plants, etc.) or services (i.e., airline tickets, telephone service, etc.). Further, with the present invention, the risk placed on a seller is substantially reduced.

A feature of the invention is a sale offer that is electronically presented to one or more selected individuals who have registered themselves at the Central Web site or administrator. The sale offer is for a good having substantial value at a substantially discounted price or for "free" (i.e., for free or a price near zero plus delivery charges-if applicable) for a very limited amount of time.

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ARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
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An individual may become eligible to receive sale offers upon registering with the administrator or the Central Web Site by providing a request to sign-up and then obtaining and installing a program or software modules that operates in conjunction with their Web browser, the plug-in . Such registered individuals are also referred to herein as "selected" or "prequalified" visitors or buyers. The program will permit sale offers to be communicated to registered individuals who are browsing any of a number of web sites that are associated, in the sense that they are sites from which sale offers will be generated and presented to registered visitors. A registered consumer surfing a particular Web site which is associated with an administrator or central Web site at a certain point in time – the "minute" – will receive an offer for a "free" good. The Happy Minute® will appear on a random basis during the day, so that the consumer does not know when the Happy Minute® starts. Consequently, consumers have an incentive to browse in one of the web sites that form of the Happy Minute network sites about which he/she is informed by the means of the plug-in.

Using the exemplary principles of the present invention, a substantial cost is created for the enterprise or seller. However, one should consider that the invention itself creates an ever increasing buyer traffic to the Web site which is highly marketable. The potential high revenues whose amount will often be larger or above the seller's cost are obtained by selling the associated buyer traffic to advertisers (i.e., through banner sales, etc.). As a result, the high costs of selling at a price zero or near to zero is covered by the sale of an increasing buyer traffic to an advertising space buyer.

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NEGAN, HENDERSON,
ARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
SHINGTON, DC 20005
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A main distinction between the strategy of the present invention and the economic strategies of prior techniques for selling discounted goods or services, such as Web sites as Buy.com, is the fact that the latter is continuously selling goods or services with a discount (such as a 10% discount) while, under the present invention, the goods or services are, from a buyer's perspective, randomly offered solely to a registered user for zero or a sum near to zero and for a very limited period of time.

Under the operative point of view, the present invention allows sellers of goods and services to communicate a binding sale offer only to potential buyers who have preregistered, to positively respond to such an offer, immediately concluding a sales contract. In a preferred embodiment, the apparatus of the present invention includes a central controller which transmits a binding sale offer from one or more associated Web sites or electronic networks, making such an offer visible and available only to the buyers preregistered with the central or administrator Web site. Only preregistered buyers have the opportunity to accept an offer because only they will receive it. In particularly only those preregistered users that keep their plug-in active, that are currently surfing the specified page of the Web site during the Happy Minute moment will be aware of an offer, because the plug-in allows sale offers to be seen. Such Buyers then have the possibility to accept the sale offer, and thus bind the corresponding seller to a contract. As indicated above, the method and apparatus of the present invention may be implemented through the Internet, as well as any other type of electronic network system or environment.

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ARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
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With the present invention, the risk placed on a seller is substantially reduced. An embodiment of the invention is a sale offer that is electronically presented to a registered buyer who is visiting a site and if they are actually viewing the specified page. The plug-in is capable of detecting which browser session is currently active and determining if the session pointing to the Happy Minute Web page is actually that one. If a user activates multiple sessions of its browser and doesn't keep active the window pointing to the correct site, the plug in won't display the sale offer, since the user isn't currently viewing the Web site page on which the Happy Minute is happening. The sale offer allows the preregistered user to obtain a good or service substantially discounted price or for "free" (i.e., for free or a price near zero plus delivery charges-if applicable) for a very limited amount of time. The cost of such a sale offer is very high for the owner or co-owner of the Web site, who is -- economically speaking -- the seller or a party who has entered into an agreement with a seller. However, because of the very unique nature of the sale offer of the present invention, a large number of registered buyers will crowd the Web site. Such a number of potential registered buyers is highly marketable, thus generating a substantial revenue for the owner or co-owner of the Web site.

In a preferred embodiment, the present invention provides a method and apparatus for owners of a network of associated Web sites who wish to acquire a seller's marketable traffic on such sites through a particular sale offer. The sale offer is in itself highly valuable since it serves as an advertising tool for the

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& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
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offered product or service or the site itself and provides a valid technique for communicating a binding purchase offer globally to many potential buyers.

In one embodiment of this invention, communication between sellers and registered buyers is conducted using an electronic network and central controller. The Web site owner or co-owner who wishes to make an offer accesses the central controller located at a remote server. An administrator of the Web site will create a sale offer ("SO") by specifying the time limit within which a registered buyer can accept the offer, the subject of the good or service to put on sale, the good's or service's price, an acceptance form, and finally a payment identifier. A sale offer is announced by the administrator on behalf of those web sites upon which the Happy Minute will be issued. The plug-in allows the administrator to be aware of which users are currently surfing that particular web site.

Once a pre-registered buyer has seen the announcement of the sale offer and wishes to accept it, the potential buyer registers to accept the sale offer. At the same time, the controller "records" that a buyer is going to complete the acceptance form and prevents the successive acceptance form(s) from disappearing within the previously stated time limit.

The central controller automatically sends the preregistered buyers a unique tracking number and an acceptance form to complete with personal data while the preregistered buyer is online with the central controller allowing them the ability to accept the sale offer straight away. Alternatively, the buyers will later receive an e-mail confirming the sale offer.

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INEGAN, HENDERSON,
FARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
SHINGTON, DC 20005
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After providing all the required statements of acceptance, the buyer transmits to the central controller the acceptance form. In accordance with the present invention, the acceptance form from the buyer can be transmitted via a World-Wide-Web (WWW) interface, electronic mail or voice mail, not excluding futures evolutions of the communications media which can provide "instant" or real-time communications between a seller and a buyer.

As soon as the central controller receives the filled out acceptance form, the controller will transmit to the potential registered buyer a payment identifier together with a final statement of acceptance to be electronically signed by the buyer and filled out with credit card data or description of the cash or payment on delivery form. After acceptance of this final form, the buyer transmits it online to the seller. The buyer and seller then become parties to a legally binding contract.

In accordance with an aspect of the invention, the central controller manages the payment system between the seller and the buyer by communicating and transmitting, for example, credit card data to the buyer's bank, for confirming the availability of necessary funds or credit and the validity of the credit card used. Finally, the central controller stores the payment, keeps track of it, and sends a reply to the buyer to notify the buyer of the payment receipt.

The present invention also allows a seller to reach a large number of remotely located registered buyers who are visiting multiple associated Web sites and who would be interested in the seller's goods or services, those being related

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& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
SHINGTON, DC 20005
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to the site's content and/or offered for a disproportionate price in comparison to their real market value.

It is a goal of the present invention to provide Web site owners with a robust method and system to improve the capacity of traffic to the Happy Minute Network sites which is highly marketable. In accordance with another embodiment of the invention, an industrial or commercial enterprise, owner or co-owner of an Web site, begins to input into its site a sale offer of goods and/or services of high quality priced at zero or nearly zero. The Web site's owner is not necessarily the producer or provider of such goods and services. In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the price for the good is zero plus delivery expenses or a trivial cost (e.g., one cent) plus delivery expenses (e.g., $52 dollars), the delivery cost being determined by the buyer's location.

The offer is transmitted only to the pre-registered buyers through the Internet over a number of associated Web sites. Unpredictably, from the standpoint of the buyer, the offer will appear on the plug-in screen of those users who are currently viewing the page of the Web site upon which the offer is made. The central controller, which generates the sale offer can also be programmed via a random function, so that nobody can predict when the sale offer will appear. This unpredictability also creates a heightened level of expectation because the availability of such an offer is extremely short in terms of time. That is to say, if the potential registered buyer does not enter the agreement process within a predetermined period of time (e.g., within a selected number of seconds, minutes, hours, weeks, etc.), the sale offer form disappears and is no longer

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available until a new sale offer appears. The potential buyer who starts to complete an acceptance form associated with the offer can be safeguarded from the disappearance of the same acceptance form. It is only necessary that the potential buyer does not leave the form. However, the acceptance form and the offer may be withdrawn if the potential buyer fails to complete the acceptance form within a predetermined period of time (e.g., within a selected number of seconds, minutes, hours, weeks, etc.).

It is easily understandable that, just because of the simple fact of offering goods or services of high quality (i.e., a video camera, a digital tape recorder, an airline ticket, telecommunication services or other goods and services) at a price near to zero, there should be a substantial traffic increase into the Web site which adopts the present invention. As a result of this traffic increase, revenue from advertising over the side itself will also increase. The increase in revenue can not only fully recover the cost for the above sale, but may render the web site largely profitable, as well.

The seller can also decide to repeat the offer during the day, the week, month or year, but this does not substantially change the basic mechanism or features of the invention. In addition, it is not necessary that goods or services offered be produced or provided by the offeror. Under the present invention, the offered items can serve as a support or stimulus for the purchase of the site's own different goods and services, and for the web site's economic life cycle.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings are included to provide a further understanding of the invention and are incorporated in and constitute a part of

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this specification. The drawings illustrate embodiments of the invention, and, together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention. In the drawings,

Fig. 1 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a network environment for implementing the features of the present invention;

Fig. 2 is a block diagram showing an embodiment of a central controller, consistent with the principles of the invention;

Fig. 3 is a block diagram showing an embodiment of a seller interface, consistent with the principles of the invention;

Fig. 4 is a block diagram showing an embodiment of a buyer interface, consistent with the principles of the invention;

Fig. 5 illustrates an embodiment of a Web site's homepage before a sale offer is transmitted from the central controller, consistent with the principles of the invention;

Fig. 6 illustrates an embodiment of a Web site's information page about a sale offer;

Fig. 6a illustrates an exemplary embodiment for a user registration entry form to be completed by a potential registrant;

Fig. 6b illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a personal data entry form to be completed by a potential buyer;

Fig. 7A illustrates one aspect of the features of an administrator page for use by the Web site's administrator;

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Fig. 7B illustrates another aspect of the features of an administrator page for use by the Web site's administrator;

Fig. 7C illustrates yet another aspect of the features of an administrator page for use by the Web site's administrator;

Fig. 8 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a sale offer announcement appearing in the associated Web sites' pages for viewing by potential buyers;

Fig. 9 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of an administrator page showing that the central controller has received a buyer "sign-in," automatically assigned a tracking number, and having sent an acceptance form.

Fig. 10 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a sale offer information page received by a potential buyer;

Fig. 11 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of an administrator page showing that the central controller has received data from a personal entry data form and automatically having sent an acceptance form to the buyer;

Fig. 12 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of an acceptance form received and completed by the buyer;

Fig. 13 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a credit card data entry form to be completed by the buyer;

Fig. 14 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of an administrator page showing money transfer response data;

Fig. 15 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a successfully completed transaction page received by a buyer;

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Fig. 16 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of an administrator page showing data for a successfully completed transaction;

Fig. 17 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a unsuccessfully completed transaction page received by a buyer;

Fig. 18 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of an administrator page showing data for an unsuccessfully completed transaction;

Fig. 19 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a warning message on the Web site's page, notifying a buyer that a sale offer is no longer available and the transaction is considered null and void;

Fig. 20 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a sale cancellation announcement received by a potential buyer in response to clicking the "leave" button indicating that a sale offer is no longer available;

Fig. 21 is an exemplary flow chart illustrating how a potential buyer interacts with a seller to view and accept sale offers;

Fig. 22 is an exemplary flow chart illustrating how a seller or site administrator inputs sale offer parameters to generate sale offers, receives buyer tracking and contract data, and completes a sale offer transaction with a buyer; and

Fig. 23 is an exemplary flow chart illustrating the processes and operations for generating and accepting a buyer's response to sale offers, consistent with the principles of the present invention.

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& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
ASHINGTON, DC 20005
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Figs. 24a-c show an exemplary flow chart illustrating the processes and operations for registration of users, obtaining and installing a browser plug-in used in conjunction with the receipt of sale offers.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The present invention described herein may be implemented as logical operations in a network environment (such as, for example, the Internet) including computing systems, thin clients, low-end network stations and/or other types of terminals. The logical operations of the invention may be implemented through any suitable combination of hardware, software and/or firmware. For example, the features of the invention may be implemented: (1) as a sequence of computer implemented steps running on a computing system; or (2) as interconnected machine modules within a computing system. The implementation is a matter of choice that is dependent on the performance requirements of the computing system implementing the various features and aspects of the invention. Accordingly, the logical operations making up the aspects and embodiments of the invention described herein are referred to variously as operations, steps or modules.

In addition, the present invention relates to computer readable media that include program instructions for performing various computer-implemented operations. The media and programming instructions may be those specially designed and constructed for the purposes of the present invention, or may be of a kind well known and available to those having skill in the computer software arts. Examples of computer readable media include, but are not limited to, magnetic media, such as hard disks, floppy disks and magnetic tape; optical

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300 I STREET, N. W.
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media such as CD-ROM disks; magneto-optical media, such as optical disks; and hardware devices that are specially configured to store and perform program instructions, such as read-only memory (ROM) and random access memory (RAM). Examples of program instructions include both machine code that can be produced by a compiler, and files containing higher level code that can be executed by a computer using an interpreter.

Generally, the present invention provides a method and apparatus for offering goods and services in an electronic network environment, such as, for example, the Internet. According to the various features and aspects of the invention, a number of sellers who own, co-own or enter into an agreement with an owner of an administrator or central Web site, generates sales offers for one or more goods or services to visitors of any number of associated Web sites, whereby such a visitor may accept and receive the goods or services at a deeply discounted price or at virtually no cost.

As used herein, the term "associated" Web site is intended to refer to one of a number of Web sites that have arranged with a central, or administrator, Web site to permit sale offers to be communicated to registered buyers who are visiting or browsing any one of the so-associated sites. Therefore, a visitor who is visiting one associated Web site that features one type of good or service may, nevertheless, receive a sale offer from a seller of a totally different good or service, the only requirement being that both sellers have Web sites that have thus associated with the Central Web site or administrator.

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FARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
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It is within the scope of the invention that a sale offer is typically communicated only on one Web site at a time to a user having installed the plug-in. It is, nevertheless, possible for the central controller to send more than one sale offer on behalf of more than a single Web site at the same moment.

In the context of goods offered by a seller, a visitor who accepts a sale offer (i.e., the buyer) may only be required, for example, to pay 0 - 1 cent, with or without delivery charges. Services offered by a seller may also be offered at a deeply discounted price or on virtually "free" basis. Since the goods or services are offered on a heavily discounted or free basis, each Web site hosting the sale offer will experience increased traffic or "hits" from visitors connected to the Internet. The sale offer, therefore, has value to Web site owners by providing a means for increasing traffic or hits to the Web sites, thereby increasing the value of the Web sites and/or increasing e-commerce conducted through the sites. The sale offer also provides value to the seller in the form of an effective means for advertising goods or services over the Internet.

In order to increase and/or maintain the number of visitors to associated Web sites, the goods or services that are offered over such Web sites may be offered at unpredictable or random times. For example, a system administrator may select one or more times during a specific date on which the sale offer is to be made on the associated Web sites. The time(s) at which the sale offer is selected by the system administrator may be kept secret from Web site visitors so as to make the offer "unpredictable". Alternatively, a system administrator may program a central controller

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NNEGAN, HENDERSON,
FARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
SHINGTON, DC 20005
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module, such that a sale offer is provided on one or more of the associated Web sites, the central controller will send more than one kind of sale offer at the same time, as a result of the sale offer generation mechanism. In this case, multiple sets of sales offers transmitted to two sets of users, each one visiting one web site on behalf of which the sale offers are generated. The central controller may also be programmed for "randomness" of the sale offer which will also increase and peak interest in the Web sites, as visitors link to and/or browse the Web sites in anticipation of the sale offer being displayed or communicated through a visited Web site.

When providing a sale offer, each sale offer may be made available to all registered buyers that are presently visiting the associated Web sites and exchanging information with the Web server or central controller. In some cases, the capacity of the Web server or central controller may be limited so that only a predetermined number of buyers (e.g., 200 buyers) can receive the sale offer at any given instant. Alternatively, a limited number of sale offers (not necessarily restricted by the capacity of the server or controller) may be provided to registered buyers visiting and exchanging information with the associated Web sites when the offer is to be made. In such a case, the sale offer may expire prior to the duration or period of the offer, if all of the predetermined sale offers have been accepted by buyers who received the offer through the Web sites. It is also possible to select one or more individual Web sites from all the Web sites that are associated, so that only those Web sites that fit a particular marketing or other business objective of the seller will be used to present a sale offer to

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FARABOW, GARRETT,
& DUNNER, L.L.P.
300 I STREET, N. W.
ASHINGTON, DC 20005
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prospective registered buyers. It is also possible to target particular buyers from among all those who are registered, so that only buyers who have a certain profile or other type of identifier that matches a predetermined profile or identifier selected by the seller can actually receive a sale offer. Taken to the extreme, it would also be feasible to so target a small group--or even a single individual--in this manner.

Finally, both features may be combined so that only selected associated Web sites and/or targeted registered (selected or prequalified) buyers may be chosen as of the sale offer to be conveyed on, and made to, respectively. With such targeted approaches, the seller may target such specific Web sites and/or types of buyers with the sale offer.

In one embodiment of the present invention, communication between sellers and buyers is conducted using an electronic network and central controller. In a preferred embodiment, the electronic network comprises the Internet. Potential buyers can access the Internet through a variety of devices, such as through a personal computer, an interactive TV device, a wireless phone, a personal digital assistant (PDA) or any other communication device. Associated Web site owners or sellers who wish to make offers may access a central controller, which may be implemented through a server, computing system or module connected to the Internet, through a direct dial-up connection or over the Internet though an Internet service provider, for example. Through the central controller, a system administrator for the seller will create a sale offer ("SO") by specifying the subject of the good or service to be placed on sale, the

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good's or service's price, the limited time period during which a registered buyer can accept the offer, an acceptance form, and finally a payment identifier. The sale offer is then conveyed over the Internet to each of the Web servers that are associated Consequently, Web surfers who are registered and who visit any of the Web sites that are so associated will be provided the opportunity to view, and respond to, the sale offer, provided that their visit to the Web site coincides with the time interval during which the sale offer is made.

Once the potential buyer has seen the announcement of the sale offer and wishes to accept it, the buyer may, through the Web site, accept the sale offer. At the same time, the central controller "records" that a buyer is going to complete an acceptance form and prevents the acceptance form from disappearing within the predetermined time limit or period.

According to an aspect of the invention, the central controller may automatically send the potential buyer a unique tracking number and an acceptance form to fill out with personal data while the buyer is online with the central controller. After filling all the required statements of acceptance, the buyer transmits, via the plug-in and through a web page on the central controller the acceptance form. Under the present invention, the acceptance form can be transmitted via a World-Wide-Web (WWW) interface, electronic mail or voice mail, not excluding further or future evolutions of communications technology and media, which will provide "instant" or real-time communication between the buyer and the seller.

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As soon the controller receives all the transmitted buyer data, together with the filled out acceptance form, the central controller transmits the potential buyer a payment identifier together with a final statement of acceptance to be electronically signed by the buyer and filled out with credit or debit card data or a description of a cash delivery form. After acceptance of this last form, the buyer transmits it, via plug-in and through a web page on the central controller in the acceptance form,- online to the seller. The buyer and seller are now parties to a legally binding contract.

The central controller manages the payment system between the seller and the buyer and transmits the credit or debit card data to the buyer's bank, for confirmation of fund availability and/or card validity. Finally, the central controller stores the payment, keeps track of it, and sends a reply to the buyer to ensure him/her of receipt of the payment receipt.

The present invention also allows sellers to reach a large number of remotely located registered buyers who normally reach Web sites and who would likely be interested in goods and services, those being related to the site's content and offered for a disproportionately low price in comparison to their real market value. The present invention also provides each associated Web site owner with a robust system to improve the capacity of traffic in the site, which is highly marketable.

As discussed above, the operating environment in which the present invention can be used encompasses network environments (such as the Internet), wherein general purpose computers, workstations, personal computers,

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network computers, thin clients, low-end network stations, interactive TV devices, wireless phones, personal digital assistants (PDA) and other types of terminals or devices are connected through communication links of various types, and wherein information objects (including applications, programs, data, images, etc.) are made available by and through various associated members of the network environment.

Exemplary interfaces and a system architecture for implementing the various features and aspects of the invention, in accordance with a preferred embodiment, will now be described with reference to Figs. 1-4.

As illustrated in the exemplary network environment of Fig. 1, the present invention may include one or more Web servers 300, which are "associated", as described above, a central controller 200 and one or more registered users 400. (The servers, controller and users are referred to herein as "nodes.") Direct connections or links may be provided between these nodes or communication between the nodes may be facilitated by an electronic network 100. In the later case, each node may be connected to the Internet or another suitable network environment using, for example, a modem and a public switched phone network, such as those provided by a local or regional telephone operating company. Other type of network connections are also feasible, such as those facilitated by cable, satellite links, and other types of wired or wireless links. Each registered user 400 may communicate with central controller 200 over the Internet using conventional messaging protocols, for example, the TCP/IP protocol. In actuality, when a registered user visits a Web site using a conventional Web

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browser, such as Netscape Navigator, Netscape Communicator, or a Microsoft Internet Explorer Web browser, that user is connected to a Web server which hosts the Web page being observed by that user. By virtue of the TCP/IP-based connection, exchanges of messages may be enabled between the registered user and the Web server. Such messages may include, for example, registration information supplied by a user, a sale offer, acceptance forms, and similar data, as is more fully described hereinafter. It is to be understood that the term "messages" is intended to encompass all manner of written or graphical information, such as, for instance, plaintext, windows, icons, banners, e-mails, applets, plug-ins, cookies, programs, scripts (e.g. Java scripts), downloadable files, blank forms which can be filled in or completed by the viewer, and the like.

Referring to Fig. 2, central controller 200 is connected to a data storage device 250 which may include hard disk magnetic or optical storage units, as well as CD-ROM drives or flash memory. Data storage device 250 may contain a number of databases used in the processing of transactions in the present invention, including buyer database 255 and registered user database 258.

Buyer database 255 maintains data on buyers, by providing a number of fields, such as name, address, credit card number, phone number, ID number, social security number, electronic mail address, credit history, past system usage, public/private key information, etc. This information is obtained from buyers when they first register with the system. An additional database which may be included in data store 250 is database 258 which may be utilized to store information about registered users or buyers, such as the particular sites they

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have visited, the nature and amount of any purchases they made, personal preferences and additional demographic-type data. Database 258 may also be used to enable recognition of the fact that one or more particular individuals is currently browsing a Web site that is part of the network of associated sites. In a preferred embodiment, database software, such as Oracle7, manufactured by Oracle Corporation, is used to create and manage these databases. Using the above-noted components, the present invention provides a method and apparatus to transmit a sale offer available to all potential registered buyers who are connected to a member site forming a network of associated Web sites adopting the features of the invention, and allow each such buyer to accept the offer to form a legally binding contract with the seller.

As shown in Fig. 2, central controller 200 may include a central processor (CPU) 205, a cryptographic processor 210 (e.g., alternatively referred to as an encryption processor), a RAM 215, a ROM 220, a payment processor 230, a clock 235, an operating system 240, a network interface 245, and data storage device 250. A conventional personal computer, computer workstation and/or server with sufficient memory and processing capability may be used to implement the various components of central controller 200. In accordance with one embodiment of the invention, central controller 200 operates as a Web server or host of the Web site incorporating the features of the invention, both transmitting sale offers generated by the seller and receiving acceptance forms completed by each buyer. Central controller 200 must be capable of reasonable speed for high volume transaction processing, performing a significant number of

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mathematical calculations in processing communications and database storage. A Pentium processor or higher generation of processor manufactured by Intel may be used for CPU 205, that employs, for example, a 32-bit architecture. Comparable processors include Motorola 120 MHz Power PC 604 or Sun Microsystem 1660 MHz Ultra SPARC-I, for example. In addition, a microcontroller, such as a MC68HC16 currently manufactured by Motorola may be used as encryption processor 210. This type of microcontroller uses a 16-bit multiply-and-accumulate instruction in the 16 MHz configuration and requires less than one second to perform a 512-bit RSA private key operation. Equivalent microprocessors or more powerful microprocessors may also be used. Cryptographer processor 210 supports the authentication of communications between the seller and one or more buyers.

Referring again to Fig. 2, payment processor 230 comprises one or more conventional microprocessors (such as an Intel Pentium) supporting the transfer and exchange of payments, charges or debits, attendant to the features of the invention.

Payment processor 230 may also be configured as part of CPU 205. Processing of, for example, credit card transactions by payment processor 230 may be supported with commercially available software, such as the Secure Web server manufactured by Open Market Inc. This server software transmits credit card numbers electronically over the Internet to servers located at the Open Market headquarters where card verification and processing is handled. The Integrated Commerce Service of Open Market provides back-office services

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necessary to run Web-based businesses. Services include on-line account statements, order-taking and credit card payment authorization, credit card settlement, automated sales tax calculations, digital receipt generation, account-based purchase tracking, and payment aggregation for low-priced goods or services. Other types of credit card transaction processing systems, services, software and/or networks may also be used in conjunction with the present invention.

Data storage device 250 may include hard disk magnetic or optical storage units, as well as CD-ROM drives or flash memory. Data storage device 250 contains databases used in the processing of transactions in the present invention, including buyer database 255, seller database 260, sale offer (SO) database 265, seller response database 270, purchase confirmation database 275, contract detail database 280, payment database 285, cryptographic key database 290, and audit database 295. In a preferred embodiment database software, such as Oracle7, manufactured by Oracle Corporation, is used to create and manage these databases. Data storage device 250 also stores information pertaining to buyer account 297 and seller account 298.

Buyer database 255 maintains data on buyers, by providing a number of fields, such as name, address, credit card number, phone number, ID number, social security number, electronic mail address, credit history, past system usage, public/private key information, etc. This information is obtained when a buyer first registers with the system, completing the acceptance form for the sale offer, referred to as "SO." Buyer database 255 also contains the tracking number

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of each acceptance form filled out by the buyer, and the tracking number for the sale offer. Seller database 260 maintains data on sellers with fields, such as name, contact information, public/private key information, payment preferences, type of business, and goods or services sold. Contact information comprises a phone number, Web page URL, bulletin board address, pager number, telephone number, electronic mail address, voice mail address, facsimile number, or any other way to contact the seller.

Database 258 stores information about registered users, such as the particular sites they have visited, the nature and amount of any purchases they may have made, personal preferences and additional demographic-type data. Database 258 may also be used to enable recognition of the fact that one or more particular registered individuals is currently browsing a Web site that is part of the network of associated sites.

SO database 265 tracks all sales offers fields, such as status, tracking number, date, time, article, price, expiration date, conditions, and buyer identification number. This database is valuable in the event of disputes between buyers and sellers regarding payment, because details of the contract can be produced. SO database 265 may also store bond certificate and other related information.

Seller response database 270 tracks all sales offer and/or seller responses with various fields, such as seller name, seller ID number, date, time, seller response tracking number, and associated sales offer tracking number.

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Purchase confirmation database 275 tracks messages sent between the buyer and seller confirming completed transactions (bound contracts). Fields include buyer name, buyer ID number, seller name, seller ID number, purchase confirmation tracking number, and associated sale offer tracking number.

Payment database 285 tracks all payments made by buyers by means of fields, such as buyer name, buyer ID number, amount of payment, and associated sale offer tracking number. This database may also store credit card numbers of buyers.

Cryptographic or encryption key database 290 facilitates cryptographic functions, storing both symmetric and asymmetric keys. These keys are used by cryptographic processor 210 for encrypting and decrypting buyer credit card number and date of expiration.

Audit database 295 stores transactional information relating to the transmission of each sale offer, allowing it to be retrieved for later analysis.

Buyer account 297 tracks all information pertaining to the buyer's account with fields, such as buyer's name, bank and credit account numbers, and debit transactions.

Seller account 298 tracks all information pertaining to the seller's account with fields such as seller's name, bank and credit account numbers, and debit or credit transactions. Buyer payments for a sale offer may be sent to this account database.

Network interface 245 is the gateway to permit central controller 200 to communicate with buyers and sellers through respective buyer interface 400 and

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seller interface 300. Conventional internal or external modems may serve as network interface 245. Network interface 245 supports modems at a range of baud rates from 1200 upward, but may combine such inputs into a T1 or T3 line if more bandwidth is required. In a preferred embodiment, network interface 245 is connected with the Internet and/or any commercial on-line service such as America Online, CompuServe, or Prodigy, allowing buyers and sellers to have access from a wide range of on-line connections. Several commercial electronic mail servers also include the above functionality. Network interface 245 may be configured as a voice mail interface, Web site interface, BBS, or electronic mail address.

While the above embodiment describes a single platform acting as central controller 200, those skilled in the art will realize that the functionality can be distributed over a plurality of computers or platforms. In one embodiment, central controller 200 is configured in a distributed architecture, wherein the databases and processors are housed in separate units or locations. Some controllers perform the primary processing functions and contain at a minimum RAM, ROM, and a general processor. Each of these controllers is attached to a WAN hub which serves as the primary communication link with the other controllers and interface devices. The WAN hub may have minimal processing capability itself, serving primarily as a communications router. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that an almost unlimited number of controllers may be supported. This arrangement yields a more dynamic and flexible system, less prone to catastrophic hardware failures affecting the entire system. Such a trusted server

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embodiment provides a distributed environment, including a server, a trusted server and a bonding agency. The hardware of these servers would be configured similarly to that described for central controller 200.

Fig. 3 illustrates the features of an exemplary seller interface 300 and Fig. 4 illustrates the features of an exemplary buyer interface 400. In an exemplary embodiment, seller interface 300 and buyer interface 400 are both conventional personal computers having an input device, such as a keyboard, mouse, or conventional voice recognition software package; a display device, such as a video monitor; a processing device such as a CPU; and a network interface such as a modem. These devices interface with central controller 200, either directly or through a network environment (such as the Internet).

As shown in Fig. 3, seller interface 300 includes a central processor unit (CPU) 305, a RAM 315, a ROM 320, a clock 335, a video driver 325, a video monitor 330, a communication port 340, an operating system 390, an input device 345, a modem 350, and a data storage device 360. A Pentium microprocessor, such as the 100 MHz P54C described above, may be used for CPU 305. Clock 335 is a standard chip-based clock which can serve to timestamp a seller response or communication produced by seller interface 300. Modem 350 does not necessarily require high-speed data transfer because most seller responses or communications are text-based and not long.

As further shown in Fig. 3, seller interface 300 also includes a data storage device 360. Data storage device 360 includes a message database 370 and audit database 380 and may be configured with a conventional magnetic-

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based hard disk storage unit, such as those manufactured by Conner Peripherals. Message database 370 may be used for archiving seller responses or communications, while audit database 380 may be used for recording payment records and communications with central controller 200 or buyer interface 400.

As shown in Fig. 4, buyer interface 400 includes a central processor unit (CPU) 405, a RAM 415, a ROM 420, a clock 435, a video driver 425, a video monitor 430, a communication port 440, an operating system 490, an input device 445, a modem 450, and a data storage device 460. A Pentium microprocessor, such as the 100 MHz P54C described above, may be used for CPU 405. Clock 435 is a standard chip-based clock which can serve to timestamp a buyer response or communication produced with buyer interface 400. Modem 450 may not require high-speed data transfer because most buyer responses or communications are text-based and not long. Data storage device 460 includes a message database 470 and an audit database 480, and may be configured with a conventional magnetic-based hard disk storage unit, such as those manufactured by Conner Peripherals. Message database 470 may be used for archiving messages or other communications, and audit database 480 may be used for recording payment records and communication with central controller 200 or seller interface 300.

There are many commercial software applications that can enable the communications required by seller interface 300 or buyer interface 400, the primary functionality being message creation and transmission. Eudora Pro

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manufactured by Qualcomm incorporated, for example, provides editing tools for the creation of messages as well as the communications tools for routing a message to the appropriate electronic address. When central controller 200 is configured as a Web server, conventional communications software, such as the Netscape Navigator Web browser from Netscape Corporation, may also be used. For example, the buyer and seller may use the Netscape Navigator browser or another type of browser to transmit or accept sale offers, seller responses, buyer response or counteroffers (if applicable). Moreover, the buyer and seller may be required to use proprietary software to generate or receive such sale offers.

In general, communications relating to the sale offers take place via an electronic network such as the Internet, the web sites themselves act as normal web sites. The plug-in allows the sites to be part of the Happy Minute Network. Each plug-in "talks" periodically with the central controller to receive lists of the web sites that form the Happy Minute Network. During user navigation, the plug-in keeps track of the event of going into and out of an associated Web site and sends information of the event to the central controller. So the central controller is aware about the users currently visiting the associated web sites. To send the sale offer the central controller simply "talks back" to the plug-in to display the acceptance form. Each Web site may be owned by, or operated for, the benefit of a particular seller of goods or services. Web sites may also be provided that are owned by or operated for the benefit of a third party. In such cases, the Web site may provide information related to the goods or services of the seller and/or routinely offer the goods or services of the seller. As indicated above, the sale

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offers of the present invention are electronically presented on one or more associated Web sites for viewing and acceptance by a buyer visiting such site when the sale offer is made. The generation of the sale offers may be controlled by the central controller 200 so that the offers appear at unpredictable times during the day on the Web site. The quantity and type of goods or services that are offered may be set according to communications or instructions received from the seller. The seller may also designate the frequency and period of time during which each sale offer is presented. Responses from buyers and/or the results of the sale offers may be collected by the central controller 200 and communicated to the seller. Communications between the buyer and seller may also be supported through the electronic network environment of the invention to facilitate the completion of the sale of the goods or services and/or to permit additional promotions or offers to be communicated from the seller to the buyer.

Described next, with reference to Figs. 24a-c, is a process for a Web site visitor to become a registered user and thus become eligible to receive sale offers while the registered user visits member Web sites that are associated with the Happy Minute Network, or the home page of the Happy Minute Network administrator itself.

Typically, a user will first establish a dial-up connection with an Internet Service Provider (ISP) and launch a Web browser (S.400). Next, the user will either "surf" the Internet, or select a bookmarked or favorite home page to browse. Upon visiting the Happy Minute Network administrator home page, or a Web page of a Happy Minute Network member (i.e., an associated Happy Minute

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Network Web site) (S.410), an introductory or explanatory Web page describing the Happy Minute Network concept and features, such as shown in Fig. 6, will be presented (S.420). If the visitor is interested in participating, he or she may click on the "sign-up" icon or button which will result in a registration window or frame popping up, an example of which is depicted in Fig. 6a (S.430). The viewer may click the "Leave" button in the registration window (S.440) in which case the registration process is aborted (S.450). The registration window includes a form with a number of fields that may be completed by the registrant (S.460). These include the registrant's first and last name, street address, city, state/country and e-mail address. Other appropriate registrant-related data may also be requested by providing additional fields in the registration form. Once the visitor has provided the requested data (S.460), an "OK" button may be clicked (S.470) which permits all of the collected data to be transmitted to the central controller 200 (S.490) and stored in the registered user database 258 of data storage device 250 (S. 500). After completing the registration process, each registered user will be assigned a unique personal ID number which is also stored in database 258 and which is transmitted to the user as confirmation that he or she has been duly registered (S.510). Alternatively, a visitor may entirely abort the registration process by clicking a "leave" button which is also provided on the registration frame or window (S.480).

The registration process additionally includes furnishing of a plug-in to the registered user's computer system. After being supplied with a personal ID number (S.510), the Happy Minute Network administrator Web site automatically

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downloads the plug-in (S.520) and installs the same in a predefined system directory (S.540). The user will then be able to monitor the progress of the download through a "Saving Location" window which typically shows a progress bar. The window disappears once the download is complete. The downloaded file is an executable program which is run by the user by opening or running the program which will then install the plug-in to thereby become part of the Web browser functionality (S.540). Meanwhile, the administrator Web site notes the user having proceeded with the plug-in download step and records this in the registered user database 258 as part of that user's profile (S.530). Certain browsers and operating systems require a system reboot before a plug-in will be recognized (S. 550). After any necessary reboot, the user may launch the browser (S.560).

A plug-in is a software module designed to work in cooperation with an Internet browser or other means to access associated Web sites (also referred to as "content sites") connected to the electronic network (e.g. BBS, Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) servers). When the browser starts, the plug-in will automatically wake up and initialize itself, giving information to the user, opening, for example, a frame or window on a visible area of the screen (S.570). After such wake up, the plug-in will automatically connect to the central controller and download the list of the content sites belonging to the Happy Minute Network (S.580). The list of the content sites then appears in a frame or window in the browser (S.590). While a user surfs the net, the plug-in will acquire from the browser (or other kind of software used to access the electronic network)

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information about the content sites being visited (S.600). When a user visits a content site belonging to the Happy Minute Network, a message will be sent to the central controller containing the name of the site and the pages the user currently is viewing (S.610). The central controller will store this information into the user tracking database for use during the sale offer event. Whenever a user leaves the Happy Minute Network Content Site, the plug-in sends another message to the central controller, so that the tracking database can record the duration of the user's visit to each site, as well as be updated to reflect that the user is no longer browsing a Happy Minute Network Content Site. When users gain access to the plug-in frame or window, they can access directly the content sites by clicking on the active links listed in the frame or window.

At this point, when the Happy Minute Network releases a sale offer, it is sent to the plug-in having communicated its being on the web site upon which the sale offer is to be made.

Referring to Figs. 5 through 21, exemplary graphical user interfaces will be described to demonstrate the principles of the invention. Moreover, reference will be made to the exemplary flow charts of Figs. 22-23 to describe how sale offers are generated, accepted and completed. Although the embodiments of Figs. 5-23 illustrate the manner in which a sale offer may be generated and accepted for particular types of goods, the present invention is not limited to the presentation of the goods shown or to sale offers for goods in general. Instead, the invention also relates to sale offers for services and may be readily adapted for generating sale offers for any type of service offered by a seller.

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Fig. 23 is an exemplary flow chart illustrating the features and operations for generating and accepting sale offers, in accordance with the principles of the present invention. Generally, as shown in Fig. 23, the process begins by the central controller monitoring the parameters that define when and how the sale offer is generated on the Web site (S.210). As disclosed herein, these parameters may include the frequency and duration during which the sale offer is to be presented on the Web site during a given day. For example the sale offer generation parameters may define the specific time(s) when the sale offer is to be presented, or they may simply indicate the number of offers to be presented per day, with the exact time for generating each offer being randomly selected by the central controller. The sale offer generation parameters may also indicate how long each sale offer is to be presented on the Web site and whether to terminate the sale offer if a potential buyer does not provide sufficient data or does not confirm acceptance of the sale offer within a predetermined time period. Other parameters concerning each sale offer may also be stored and monitored by the central controller, including the quantity and/or type of goods to be offered, and the price (if any) and sale terms for the offer.

While monitoring the sale offer generation parameters, the central controller determines when it is time to present the sale offer on the Web site (S.220). If the central controller determines that it is time to present the sale offer (S.220;Yes), then the sale offer is electronically presented on the Web site according to the parameters (S.230). As indicated above, the time to generate the sale offer may be predefined by the sale offer generation parameters or

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randomly triggered by, for example, an internal clock of the central controller. When it is time to present a sale offer, the central controller causes the sale offer to be displayed. If, however, the central controller determines that it is not time to present the sale offer (S.220;No), then the sale offer is not generated and the central controller continues to monitor the sale offer generation parameters (S.210).

After presenting the sale offer on the Web site (S.220), the central controller will monitor which users that are connected to the Web site have responded to the sale offer and requested to sign-in for more information on the offer. In other words, the central controller will determine when a potential buyer has decided to sign-in for the sale offer (S.240). When there is a sign-in by a potential buyer (S.240;Yes), the central controller will then request contract and payment data from the potential buyer (S.250). The contract data may include the name and address of the potential buyer. The payment data may include payment terms or instructions, such as credit card information or confirmation of cash payment on delivery. The request for the contract and payment data may be displayed through one or more windows or pop-up screens on the Web site. These windows or screens may also include more detail concerning the goods or services offered, as well as the specific terms of the sale offer. In addition, these windows or screens may request the potential buyer to confirm acceptance of the sale offer and, thus, form a legally binding contract with the seller.

In response to the request from the central controller, the potential buyer may provide the requested data and confirm acceptance of the sale offer through

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their interface to the electronic network environment. The central controller will then receive the requested data and confirmation from the buyer (S.260). This information may be stored and/or verified by the central controller in order to complete the sale offer transaction with the buyer (S.270). For example, the central controller may verify that all of the necessary data (such as name, address, etc.) and the confirmation of the acceptance was collected by the buyer. The central controller may also verify the payment terms or instructions (such as a valid credit card number) before completing the transaction with the buyer. If all necessary data is verified by the central controller, then the confirmation may be sent to the buyer with, for example, a tracking or reference number in order to complete the transaction. The central controller may also post or issue a purchase and delivery order containing the buyer's data, so that the purchased goods are delivered in a timely fashion by one or more agents.

In the event that the potential buyer does not accept the terms of the sale offer or fails to provide the requested data and confirmation to the central controller, then the sign-in process with the potential buyer may be terminated. For this purpose, the potential buyer may be given the option to leave the sign-in process by entering an appropriate response (e.g., clicking a designated icon or button on the screen). The exemplary process described in the flow chart of Fig. 23 may also be modified to permit termination of the sign-in process with the potential buyer if other conditions are present. For example, the sign-in process may be terminated if improper data is entered by the potential buyer or if the data

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entered by the buyer can not be verified (such as an unconfirmed credit card number).

Referring again to Fig. 23, the central controller monitors and responds to each potential buyer that has decided to sign-in for the sale offer (S.240). Since the sale offer of the present invention is preferably displayed for only a limited time, the central controller may also monitor and determine when to terminate the sale offer (S.280). This determination may be performed by the central controller based on the stored sale offer parameters. A sale offer may be terminated or removed from the Web site when, for example, the defined time duration for the offer has expired. A sale offer may also be terminated if the quantity of goods to be offered has been depleted (i.e., all of the inventory of available goods has been purchased by buyers).

If the central controller determines that sale offer should be terminated (S.280;Yes), then the sale offer is removed from the plug-in by central controller (S.290). During this step, the central controller may update the content on the plug-in to replace or redisplay content (such as banner ads or other portions of the plug-in that were displaced by the sale offer. After removing the sale offer, the central controller may analyze the results of the sale offer and communicate the same to the seller or Web site owner (S.300). These results may indicate, for example, the response level to the sale offer and general information about the buyers that responded to the offer.

In accordance with the principles of the invention, Fig. 22 is an exemplary flow chart that illustrates how a potential buyer interacts with the central controller

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or seller to view and accept sale offers. In particular, as shown in Fig. 22, potential registered buyers may visit a particular associated Web site and browse the site. The Web site may be owned by the seller or may be owned by a third-party that provides information or regularly offers the goods or services of the seller. In either case, the Web site (such as that shown in Fig. 5) may contain any number of buttons or icons in the form of letters or symbols displayed on the buyer interface. Some icons can represent a particular type of room or page that displays a particular category of information. For example, as shown in the embodiment of Fig. 5, icons, here depicted as "rooms" involving different categories of information may include a Kidsroom TV, a Garage TV, a Kitchen TV or a Gym TV. Although the illustrated embodiment of Fig. 5 is shown with a finite number of particular content based rooms, any number of different types of rooms may be utilized. Other icons, such as an icon labeled “Happy Minute®,” can be included to provide information about the sale offer system. It will be further noted that the Web page shown in Fig. 5 is divided into frames, here shown by way of example, two. The right-hand frame is an exemplary depiction of the home or main page of the Happy Minute Network administrator frames, as opened by the plug-in. The left-hand frame contains a listing of other Web sites (in Uniform (or Universal) Resource Locator ("URL") format) that are associated, thereby constituting the sites that are associated with, and thereby form, the Happy Minute Network. A user who clicks on the URL of a Happy Minute Network member, is taken directly to that member's Web site, through the well-

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known feature of "linking" which is enabled in virtually all currently used Web browsers.

In order to find out how the sale offer system operates, a potential buyer may simply click on a predetermined icon (such as the “Happy Minute®” or "Info" icon) site, by linking to Happy Minute Network member's site, to visit a sale offer information page. As illustrated in the embodiment of Fig. 6, for example, the sale offer information page may include general information and describe a number of important aspects of the sale offer system. For instance, the sale offer information page may indicate that conditional purchase offers (i.e., sale offers) can be made at any time and at any location of the Web site. Moreover, the sale offer information page provides important terms of the sale offer. In particular, as illustrated in the embodiment of Fig. 6, a sale offer includes an offer to sell a product or service at a price of "zero," so long as the buyer pays the cost of delivery and/or associated fees. Other purchase price information and/or terms of sale may also be displayed to potential buyers, such as the requirement that the buyer must accept a sale offer within a limited period of time. Additionally, the sale offer information page may include links or display any other kind of information, such as a visual or audio display of the types of products that will be offered and the number of products that have yet to be offered.

Referring again to Fig. 21, while the buyer is browsing the Web site of a Happy Minute Network associate, a sale offer may be randomly generated and received by the buyer (S.20). As illustrated in the example of Fig. 8, the sale offer may appear as a pop-up window and include basic information concerning

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the sale offer (e.g., the particular product or service being offered, basic terms of the offer, etc.). The pop-up screen containing the sale offer may also include icons to permit the buyer to "Sign-in" and accept the offer, or "Leave," thereby rejecting the offer. If the buyer rejects the offer, then a notice (such as that shown in Fig. 20) may be provided to the buyer to provide notification of the canceled sale offer (S.90). Thereafter, the buyer may continue to further browse the Web site (S.10), go to another Web site, or terminate the current browser session.

As further shown in Fig. 21, if the buyer decides to accept the offer and sign-in, then another pop-up screen may be provided (such as that shown in Fig. 10) to provide more detailed information concerning the sale offer (S.30). After reviewing and further considering the sale offer, the buyer may be given another opportunity to accept or reject the sale offer. If the buyer rejects the offer, then a notice (such as that shown in Fig. 20) may be provided to give notification of the canceled sale offer (S.90). Otherwise, if the buyer decides to continue with the sign-in process, then an electronic request form (such as that shown in Fig. 16) may be displayed to request basic contract data, including the name and address of the buyer (S.40). At this point, the buyer may again be given the opportunity to continue with the sign-in process (S.50) or to reject the offer and receive a notice of the canceled sale offer (S.90).

If the buyer enters all of the requested contract data and continues with the sign-in process, then an acceptance form (such as that shown in Fig. 12) may be displayed to the buyer (S.50). The acceptance form preferably displays

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a tracking number that is generated for each transaction with the buyer. The tracking number can be used by the buyer in the future when contacting the site administrator or seller with questions regarding, for example, the contract or delivery of goods. As illustrated in Fig. 12, the acceptance form may also include or display the type of product or service to be accepted, and the cost of the transaction including, for example, the delivery, or other cost to be paid by the buyer. Moreover, the acceptance form may indicate, in unambiguous terms, that the buyer accepts each and every one of the terms of the transaction. In order to accept the displayed terms of the offer, the buyer may be requested to confirm acceptance of the terms by selecting a predetermined icon (such as an icon labeled "Accept" or "I ACCEPT"). Alternatively, the acceptance form could include an icon automatically labeled with the buyer's entered name that must be selected by the buyer to accept the offer. On the other hand, the buyer could still decline to accept the offer by selecting another predetermined icon (such as an icon labeled "Leave" or "I DECLINE").

As shown in Fig. 21, if the buyer continues with the sign-in process and confirms acceptance, then the process continues and the buyer is provided with a payment request form (S.60). The payment request form displayed to the buyer may be a credit card data entry form, such as that illustrated in Fig. 13. With such a form, each buyer who pays by credit or debit card can enter payment data, such as the credit card account number, account limit, name of issuing institution and expiration date. Alternatively, any other payment method and request form may be utilized.

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The payment information received from the buyer may be analyzed by the central controller before the sale is completed. For example, the central controller may contact a payment source, such as a bank or a credit card issuer, to confirm that the payment information is valid and that the appropriate amount of credit funds is available. If the payment information provided by the buyer is valid, then the central controller may establish a buyer account with a record of the money transferred from the buyer. The central controller also notifies the buyer of the successful completion of the money transfer (S.70) by generating a confirmation screen on the Web site (such as the illustrated embodiment of Fig. 15). Thereafter, the central controller completes the sale offer transaction with the buyer by delivering or shipping the agreed upon product to the buyer's address (S.80). If, however, the payment information provided by the buyer is invalid, the central controller will automatically notify the buyer of the unsuccessful completion of the payment process (S.65). Preferably, a message screen is displayed on the Web site (such as that illustrated in the embodiment of Fig. 17) to inform the buyer that the payment process has not been completed. This message screen may indicate the cause of the incomplete payment process (such as exceeding the amount of available credit, a shortage of funds or an invalid credit card number) and provide the buyer with the option to make payment (if any) upon receipt of the product or service (S.75). Other alternative payment methods may also be displayed.

In the event that the buyer is given an option to use an alternative payment method (S.75), the buyer may indicate their selection to continue or

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terminate the sale offer transaction. For example, in order to select a particular payment option (such as payment upon delivery or "C.O.D."), the buyer need only select a predetermined icon (such as an icon labeled "Yes") in response to the inquiry. In response to the buyer's decision to accept the alternative payment method, the sale offer transaction may be completed as normal (S.80). If, however, the buyer does not select an alternative payment method and decides to reject the sale offer (by selecting an icon labeled "No" or "Leave"), then the central controller terminates the sale offer transaction with the buyer. In such a case, the buyer may receive a warning message (such as that illustrated in Fig. 20) of the cancellation of the sale offer or, if the time period for the sale offer has expired, the buyer may receive a message (such as that illustrated on Fig. 19) that the sale offer was terminated. Either the warning message or the cancellation announcement informs the unsuccessful buyer that the transaction has been interrupted and the conditional sale offer is no longer available and will not be repeated. At this point, the transaction is considered null and void, with the conditional offer being rescinded by the seller.

Various modifications may be made to the embodiment shown in Fig. 21. For example, alternative warning messages or information screens, that provide other types of helpful information to the user or potential buyer may also be displayed by the central controller. For example, a buyer may be informed that the offer is not rescinded unless a particular payment option is selected within a stated amount of time. The buyer may also be made aware of the time remaining to accept a sale offer. Moreover, the amount of remaining products or

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services (if applicable) may also be displayed to the buyer. Additionally, information about successful buyer transactions may be displayed to the unsuccessful buyer.

Fig. 22 is an exemplary flow chart that illustrates the various features and operations that are performed by the seller or Happy Minute Network Content Web site owner (herein referred to as the "Happy Minute Network administrator") for generating and completing sale offer transactions with buyers. As illustrated in Fig. 22, the Happy Minute Network Web site administrator may log on to the central controller (step S.110) to access one or more administrator pages during any stage of a sale offer transaction. The administrator pages may be displayed on the site administrator's interface and be used to control the operation of the sale offer system and the features of the sale offer. To access the administrator pages, the site administrator may log on to the central controller through a local connection or over the network system from a remote location (such as the seller interface). With the administrator pages, such as that shown in Figs. 7A-7C, the site administrator may manually program or select the number of people that will receive a sale offer during any period of time. Moreover, the site administrator may select the type or number of products or services to be offered, the amount of the purchase price of the product or service, and the duration of the conditional offer or sale offer. The Happy Minute Network site administrator may also determine the kind of data needed to be received from the buyer in order to consummate the sale.

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The administrator pages of the present invention may also be used to provide information to the buyer or site administrator. For example, as further described herein, the central controller may be automatically or manually programmed by the site administrator to provide the buyer with information about the Web site and/or the sale offer. The administrator pages may also receive and display information from the central controller and inform the site administrator of various operational characteristics related to the sale offer system, such as the number of people visiting the Web site or the number of people that can receive the sale offer at any given point in time.

Referring again to Fig. 22, after the Happy Minute Network site administrator has accessed the central controller and administrator pages (S.110), various tasks may be performed by the site administrator. For example, the site administrator may manually program one or more of the features of the sale offer by entering general or detailed sale offer parameters (S.120; S.130). For example, if an administrator page such as that shown in Fig. 7A is provided, the site administrator may manually enter and program general parameters relating to the sale offer (S.120), such as the type of product or service to be provided, the image to be displayed with the offer and the pricing or purchasing terms for the goods or services (e.g., "0 cent + delivering fees" or "1 cent + delivering fees"). Other general parameters related to the sale offer may also be entered by the site administrator, such the time or manner in which the sale offer is generated. For instance, an automatic or manual programming option may be selected (see Fig. 7A) to indicate the time period (e.g., between a start date and

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an ending date) during which the generation of the sale offers is to be automatically or manually programmed.

The Happy Minute Network site administrator may also manually enter and program detailed parameters relating to the sale offer (S.130). For example, if an administrator page such as that illustrated in Fig. 7B is provided, the site administrator may enter the specific location and timing for generating the sale offers. Since sale offers may be displayed on any page or room of the Web site, the site administrator may specify a particular room location for generating the sale offers or program the central controller to generate the sale offer in any randomly selected number of room locations. The site administrator may also program the central controller so that the sale offers are generated at randomly selected times or a predetermined frequency over a defined time period.

Access to the central controller and administrator pages can also permit the Happy Minute Network site administrator to input or receive user access control data (S.140). For example, with an administrator page, such as the embodiment illustrated in Fig. 7C, the site administrator may receive a report on the status of the Web site at any given moment, including the number of registered users connected to the site, the number of available products or services to provide through the sale offers, whether a buyer tracking function status is active or nonactive, and the number of active tracking functions. The information provided to the site administrator could also indicate the number of people who are eligible to receive a conditional offer (as described hereinbelow) or sale offer. Preferably, the information provided to the site administrator is

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updated and displayed in real time. However, other embodiments may include displaying various types of statistical data, based on data collected for selected time periods or any other type of variable such as the number of Web site "hits" during a particular pattern of sale offers. In addition, information provided to the site administrator may indicate the amount of remaining time each potential buyers has to respond to a particular sale offer, or the particular room in which particular users are visiting. Moreover, the information displayed could allow the administrator to profile particular Web site registered users and match suitable types of sale offers accordingly. For example, a product or service for use in the kitchen could be conditionally offered to a registered user who is visiting, has visited, and/or will likely visit a particular Happy Minute Network Web site. In general, the present invention may involve conditionally offering products that are specifically related to the content of the Web site.

In accordance with the invention, each conditional offer or sale offer may be made available to all registered buyers that are currently visiting the Happy Minute Network Web site or are in any way exchanging information with the Web server or central controller. Thus, buyers (even though registered) who are viewing information from the Web site in an off-line browsing or cached browsing mode will not receive or be able to view the sale offer. Further, in some cases the capacity of the Web server or central controller may be limited so that only a predetermined number of buyers (e.g., 200 buyers) can receive the sale offer at any given time. Alternatively, a limited number of sale offers (not necessarily restricted by the capacity of the server or controller but selected by the seller)

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may be provided to buyers visiting and exchanging information with the Web site when the offer is to be made. In such a case, the sale offer may expire prior to the duration or period of the offer, if all of the predetermined sale offers have been accepted by buyers who received the offer through the Web site.

It is also possible to target particular registered buyers, so that only those buyers who have a certain profile or other type of identifier that matches a predetermined profile, characteristic, or identifier selected by the seller can actually receive the sale offer. It is possible to target buyers by any demographically-related indicia, and it is further possible to target one or more individuals by name, for example, to reward frequent buyers, or recognize those who have performed a noteworthy public service. This type of targeting can be accomplished by means of setting additional parameters associated with the generation of sale offers. With such a targeted approach, the seller or site administrator may target specific types of buyers with the sale offer. The profile of each buyer may be determined by the central controller based on historical and/or statistical data of visitations to the Web site (or other Web sites) by the buyer or a related buyer group. Alternatively, the profile of a buyer may be determined by the central controller by searching and gathering information from one or more internal or external databases, such as databases 255 and 258 stored in data storage device 250.

According to the sale offer parameters entered by the site administrator, the central controller will generate the sale offer at one or more locations in the Happy Minute Network Web sites. As discussed above, a pop-up screen or

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window may be generated (see, e.g., Fig. 8) to notify potential buyers visiting such Web sites of the sale offer. In essence, each Web site visitor will be given a choice between accepting the offer (subject to certain conditions) or rejecting the offer. As shown in Fig. 8, to preliminarily accept the offer, the potential buyer must select an icon labeled "Sign-In." To decline the offer, the potential buyer may select an icon labeled "Leave" or fail to accept the offer within the predetermined period of time set by the site administrator. For all potential buyers that sign-in, tracking data may be collected by the central controller and provided to the site administrator (S.145). The tracking data for each buyer, which can be presented to the site administrator though an additional administrator page (see, for example, Fig. 9), may include a log of the actions performed by the potential buyer (for example, "potential buyer signed") and the tracking number assigned by the central controller (for example, "12345uuyrt8954"). In operation, the central controller may automatically assign a unique tracking number for each sale offer transaction with a buyer. In addition, the central controller may time-stamp the preliminarily accepted offer from the buyer, and then store the time-stamped data for purposes of record keeping.

When a potential registered buyer decides to sign-in, the central controller causes a sale offer information page to be served up and displayed to the buyer. The information page (see, e.g., Fig. 10) may provide more detailed and helpful information regarding the sale offer, such as the type of product or service offered, as well as the terms of the offer. If a potential buyer decides to continue

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with the sign-in process, one or more contract data entry forms and acceptance forms may be displayed to request contract data (such as name, address etc.) and confirmation of the acceptance of the sale offer by the buyer. The data entry forms preferably comply with relevant contract law principles and, as such, constitutes an electronic contract with a number of particular blanks to be intentionally filled out or completed by the buyer. This information may be provided to the potential buyer to indicate the purpose of the forms and confirmation. Additionally, the potential buyer may be informed that such information could be treated adequately and in accordance with relevant privacy guidelines, such as set forth in the European Data Directive or other applicable law.

As further shown in Fig. 22, any contract data or confirmation entered by the potential buyer may be received and viewed by the Happy Minute Network site administrator (S.150). For this purpose, an administrator page may be provided (such as shown in the embodiment illustrated in Fig. 11) to indicate to the administrator the contract data and confirmation that was received by the central controller from the potential buyer. During the sign-in transaction, the potential buyer may decline to accept the offer simply by pressing a predetermined icon (such as an icon labeled "Leave"). If the potential buyer leaves the sign-in process before providing all of the requested contract data, then the central processor registers the leave selection and informs the potential buyer that the transaction has been closed and that the offer is no longer available. In such cases, the site administrator is also informed whenever a

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potential buyer user has terminated the sign-in process or declined to accept the offer (S.155).

If the potential buyer provides all of the necessary contract data and confirms acceptance of the contract terms, then the central controller receives and communicates the buyer's acceptance of the sale offer to the seller or administrator viewing through another administrator page. Next, a credit card data entry form is served up by the central controller and displayed on the buyer interface. In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the payment process begins when the buyer completes the credit card data entry form and selects the icon labeled "Send." The buyer who pays by credit card, preferably enters payment data such as the credit card account number, account limit, name of issuing institution and expiration date. Alternatively, any other payment method may be utilized. When the requested payment information is to be sent from the buyer, the central controller may perform an encryption operation by using any known encrypting protocol on the entered payment data. Such encryption protocols not only enhance the ability to authenticate the sender of a message, but also serve to verify the integrity of the message itself, proving that it has not been altered during transmission. Such techniques are referred to herein generally as cryptographic assurance methods, and will include the use of both symmetric and asymmetric keys as well as digital signatures and hash algorithms. The practice of using cryptographic protocols to ensure the authenticity of senders as well as the integrity of messages is well known in the art and need not be described here in detail. For reference, one of ordinary skill

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in the art may refer to Bruce Schneier, Applied Cryptography, Protocols, Algorithms, And Source Code In C, (2d Ed, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996).

In order to verify the payment information received from the buyer, the central controller may contact a payment source, such as a bank or a credit card issuer, to confirm that the payment information is valid and that the credit amount or appropriate funds are available. Accordingly, a buyer is prevented from using a credit card with an exceeded credit limit, or a debit card with insufficient funds to establish a buyer account. During this verification process, the central controller may generate and display money transfer response data for viewing by the Happy Minute Network site administrator (S160). Through an administrator page (see, e.g., the embodiment of Fig. 14), the site administrator may monitor the progress and status of the money transfer attempted by the central controller. If the money transfer is successful, then the central controller may automatically establish a buyer account and notify the buyer of the successful transaction. In addition, a notification of the transaction may be provided to the site administrator through an administrator page (S.170). Thereafter, the central controller completes the sale transaction by generating a delivery request so that the purchased goods or services will be timely delivered to the buyer. The delivery request may be automatically generated and sent by the central controller, or each delivery request from the central controller may be reviewed and confirmed by the site administrator before it is sent to an agent of the seller for processing. For this purpose, each delivery request may be received and viewed by the site administrator through an administrator page (see, e.g., the embodiment of Fig.

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16) before the delivery request is sent (S.180). Any completed sale offer tracking data may also be provided and viewed by the site administrator (S.190). This may be performed after the limited period for the sale offer has terminated, so that the site administrator can review the results of the sale offer and the number of sale transactions that were successfully completed.

Referring again to Fig. 22, if the attempt to transfer money fails (e.g., due to an invalid credit card number, exceeded credit limit, or insufficient funds), then the buyer is informed of the failed transaction. The central controller may also provide notice of the failed money transaction to the site administrator (S.165). Once again, an administrator page may be provided to provide such information to the site administrator. Preferably, the notification to the buyer informs the buyer of the cause of the incomplete payment process and provides the buyer with the option of choosing one or more alternative payment methods, such as cash payment upon delivery. If the buyer refuses to select an alternative payment method within a predetermined period of time, then the central controller may display a warning or sale cancellation message to indicate to the buyer that the conditional offer is no longer available and has been rescinded.

Other embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from consideration of the specification and practice of the invention disclosed herein. For example, sale offers may be made to registered users who are browsing any Web page, including those outside the associated sites or Happy Minute Network® sites. Furthermore, although the process of downloading and installing a plug-in has been described, it is also possible for construct a web

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browser so that it inherently includes the same functionality as that provided by a separate plug-in. In addition, a special room or page may be provided indicating the group of goods or services from which sale offers will be made, and/or the day, week or month when such sale offers can be expected to be offered. Such an arrangement will permit buyers to view the types of goods or services that will be made available and, optionally, to anticipate or know the day, week or month or other general time period during which such goods and services will be offered through the Web site.

Additional alterations and modifications of the present invention will be comprehended by a person skilled in the art after having read the foregoing description.

Thus, it is intended that the specification and examples be considered as exemplary only and it should be understood that the invention is not limited to the illustrative examples in this specification. Rather, the invention is intended to cover all modifications and variations that come within the scope of the following claims and their equivalents.

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WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method of making a sale offer over an electronic network system, comprising the steps of:

randomly generating an offer to purchase a product or service on the electronic network system;

communicating the randomly generated offer through the electronic network system for a predetermined period of time to one or more selected potential buyers connected to the electronic network system;

completing the sale of the product or service through the electronic network system in response to an acceptance of the offer by a buyer within the predetermined period of time; and

removing the offer from the electronic network system should the buyer not accept the offer within the predetermined period of time.

2. A method for using an electronic network system to facilitate a transaction between a seller and a buyer, said method comprising the steps of:

inputting a sale offer parameter for randomly generating at least one sale offer to purchase a product or service;

randomly displaying, through the electronic network system, the at least one sale offer to a selected buyer at an unexpected period of time; and

withdrawing the display of the randomly generated sale offer in response to an absence of an indication of acceptance of the randomly

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generated sale offer by the buyer within a predetermined period of time after the step of displaying the randomly generated sale offer.

3. An apparatus for facilitating a transaction between a buyer and a seller, comprising:

a storage device; and

a processor connected to the storage device,

wherein said storage device stores a program for controlling the processor, and said processor is operative with the program for:

providing, on a Web site, to one or more selected buyers, a notice of a randomly generated sale offer and an acceptance form;

receiving the acceptance form completed by the buyer, the completed acceptance form being received in response to the sale offer;

receiving a payment identifier from the buyer specifying a credit card account, the payment identifier being associated with the sale offer; and

providing payment to the seller by using the payment identifier.

4. An apparatus for facilitating a sale offer transaction between a seller and a buyer, comprising:

a random sale offer generating device configured for randomly generating an offer to purchase a product or service on an electronic network system;

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a communication device configured for communicating the randomly generated offer through the electronic network system for a predetermined period of time to at least one selected buyer; and

a processing system configured for completing the sale of the product or service through the electronic network system in response to an acceptance of the offer by the buyer within the predetermined period of time,

wherein the processing system is configured for removing the offer from the electronic network system when the at least one buyer does not indicate acceptance of the offer within the predetermined period of time.

5. An apparatus for facilitating a transaction between a seller and a buyer, comprising:

a processing system for receiving a sale offer parameter from the seller and randomly generating at least one sale offer to at least one selected buyer to purchase a product or service based on the sale offer parameter inputted from the seller; and

a random generation device configured for randomly displaying the at least one sale offer to a buyer at an unexpected period of time,

wherein the processing system is configured for withdrawing the randomly generated sale offer in the event the buyer does not indicate acceptance of the randomly generated sale offer within a predetermined period of time after the random generation device has displayed the randomly generated sale offer.

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6. A method of making a sale offer from a seller to at least one buyer visiting a Internet web site, comprising the steps of:

displaying, on the web site, a sale offer of a product or service to the at least one selected buyer at a random point in time unknown to the buyer; and

withdrawing the displayed sale offer from the Internet website when the at least one buyer does not indicate acceptance of the sale offer within a predetermined period of time.

7. A system for providing an electronic sale offer from a seller to at least one selected buyer visiting an Internet web site, comprising:

a generating device for generating an electronic sale offer of a product or service based on at least one parameter defined by the seller;

means for displaying the electronic sale offer of the product or service to the at least one selected buyer visiting the Internet web site at a point in time unknown to the buyer; and

a timing device in communication with the generating device and the display means for withdrawing the displayed sale offer from the Internet web site if the at least one buyer does not indicate acceptance of the offer within a predetermined period of time.

8. A method as set forth in claim 1, wherein:

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said electronic network comprises a plurality of nodes each configured for generating one or more sale offers.

9. A method as set forth in claim 1, wherein:

Selection of buyers is based on the presence of a software module operating in conjunction with means for connecting to the electronic network system.

10. A method as set forth in claim 9 wherein:

said electronic network comprises the Internet.

11. A method as set forth in claim 10, wherein:

said software module operates in conjunction with Internet browser software.

12. A method as set forth in claim 11, wherein:

said software module comprises a plug-in operating in conjunction with said browser.

13. A method as set forth in claim 10, wherein:

said software module monitors the particular Internet World Wide Web ("Web") sites visited by a buyer.

14. A method as set forth in claim 13, wherein:

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said monitoring includes communicating information about a visited Web site through the Internet to an offeror.

15. A method as set forth in claim 14, wherein:

the offer to purchase is communicated to a buyer via said software module.

16. A method as set forth in claim 15, wherein:

said offer is displayed on the browser only if a buyer is browsing a Web site associated with the source of the offer.

17. A method as set forth in claim 2, wherein:

the at least one sale offer is randomly displayed to a selected buyer only on condition that said buyer is connected to a portion of the electronic network system which is linked to the seller.

18. An apparatus as set forth in claim 3, wherein:

said notice of sale offer is viewable in conjunction with a program operating on a system used by the one or more selected buyers to view the Web site.

19. An apparatus as set forth in claim 18, wherein:

said program comprises a Web browser program.

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20. An apparatus as set forth in claim 17, wherein:

said program further includes a software module operating in conjunction with said browser.

21. An apparatus as set forth in claim 20, wherein:

Said module comprises a plug-in module operation.

22. An apparatus as set forth in claim 21, wherein:

said plug-in module monitors the particular Web sites visited by a buyer;

23. An apparatus as set forth in claim 22, wherein:

said plug-in module communicates information about a visited Web site to an offeror.

24. An apparatus as set forth in claim 23, wherein:

the offer to purchase is communicated to a buyer via said software module.

25. An apparatus as set forth in claim 24, wherein:

said offer is displayed on the browser only if a buyer is browsing a Web site associated with the source of the offer.

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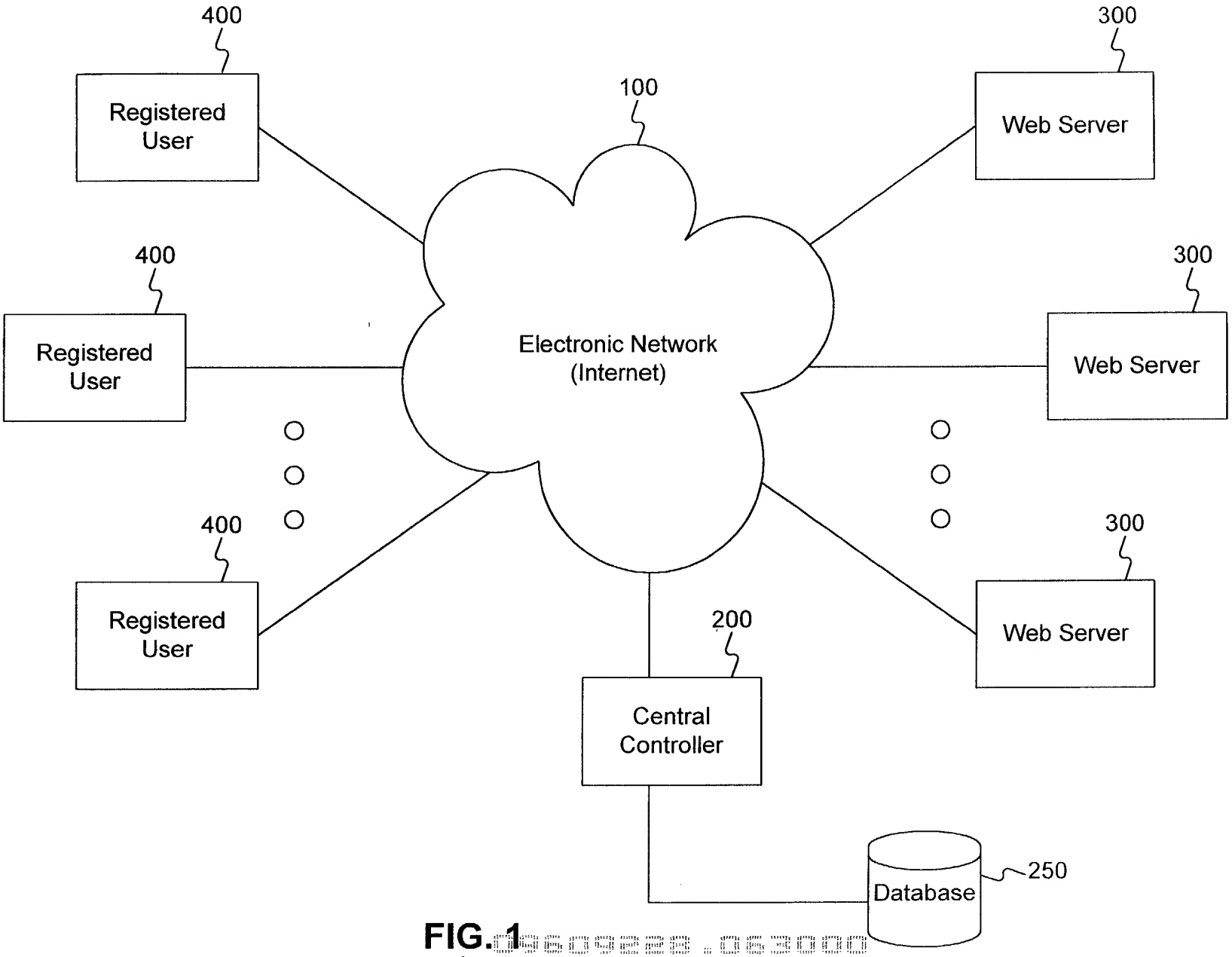

400
Registered User
400
Registered User
400
Registered User
100
Electronic Network (Internet)
300
Web Server
300
Web Server
300
Web Server
200
Central Controller
Database
250

FIG. 1

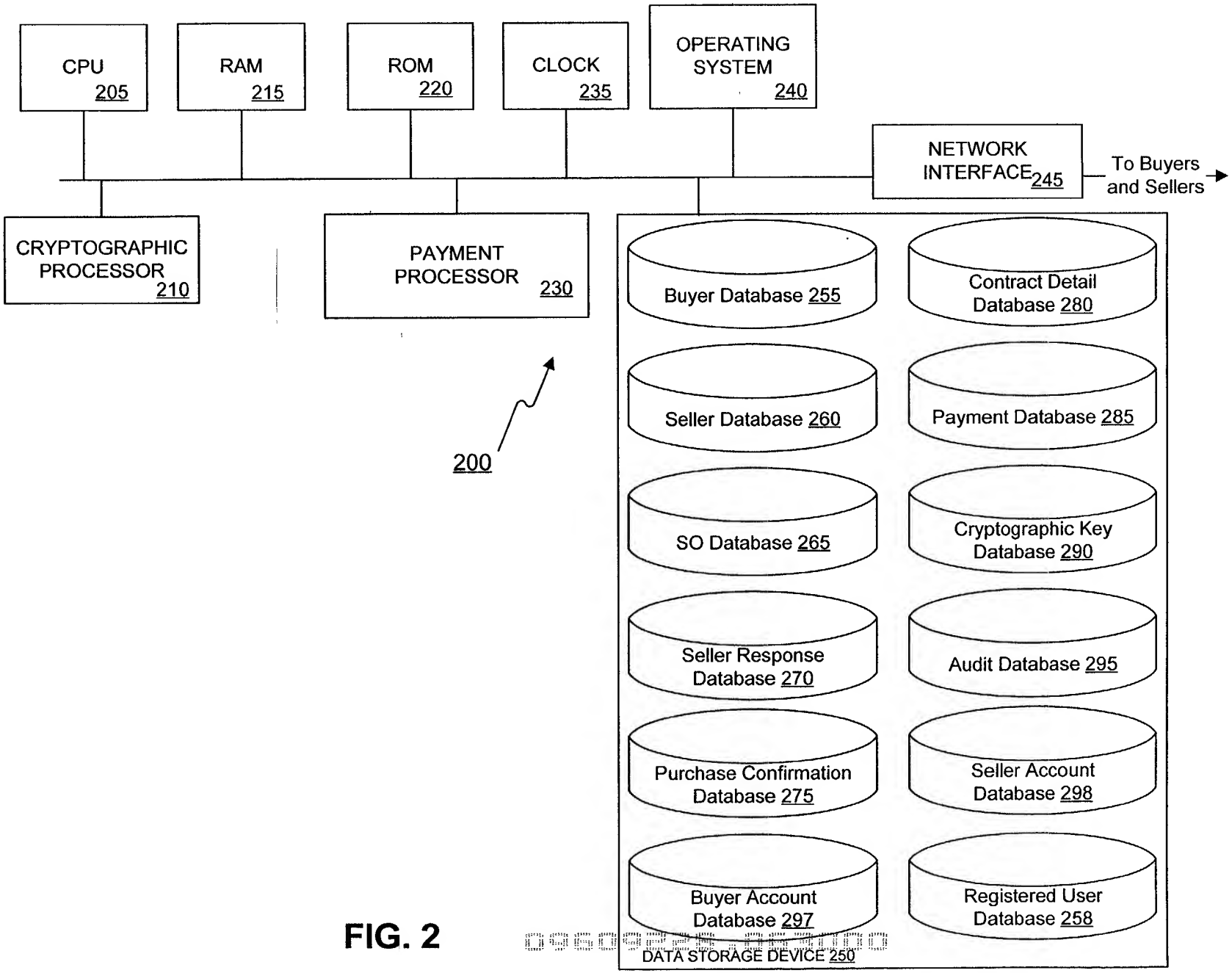

CPU 205
RAM 215
ROM 220
CLOCK 235
OPERATING SYSTEM 240
NETWORK INTERFACE 245
To Buyers and Sellers
CRYPTOGRAPHIC PROCESSOR 210
PAYMENT PROCESSOR 230
200
Buyer Database 255
Contract Detail Database 280
Seller Database 260
Payment Database 285
SO Database 265
Cryptographic Key Database 290
Seller Response Database 270
Audit Database 295
Purchase Confirmation Database 275
Seller Account Database 298
Buyer Account Database 297
Registered User Database 258
DATA STORAGE DEVICE 250

FIG. 2

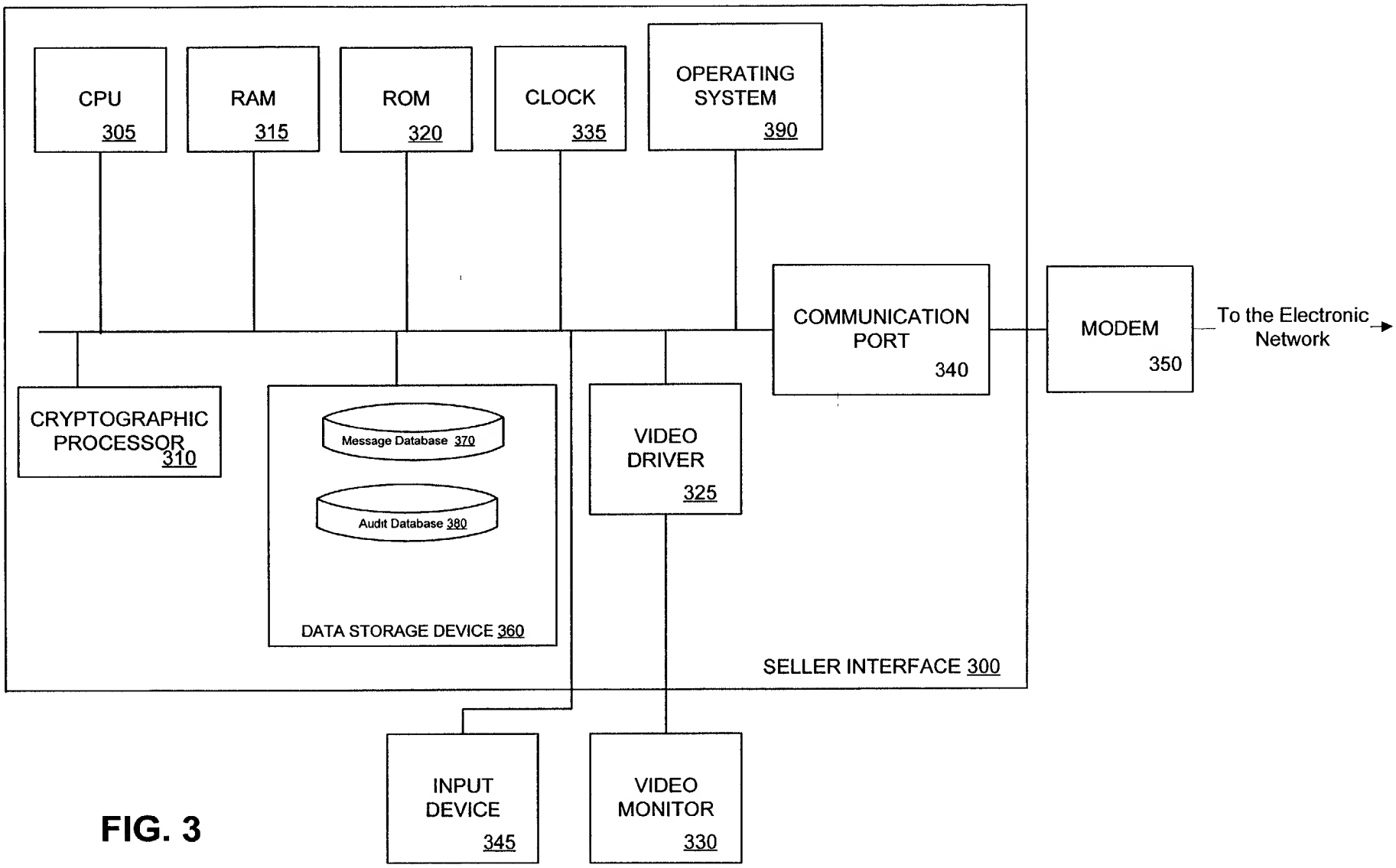

CPU
305
RAM
315
ROM
320
CLOCK
335
OPERATING SYSTEM
390
COMMUNICATION PORT
340
MODEM
350
To the Electronic Network
CRYPTOGRAPHIC PROCESSOR
310
Message Database 370
Audit Database 380
DATA STORAGE DEVICE 360
VIDEO DRIVER
325
SELLER INTERFACE 300
INPUT DEVICE
345
VIDEO MONITOR
330

FIG. 3

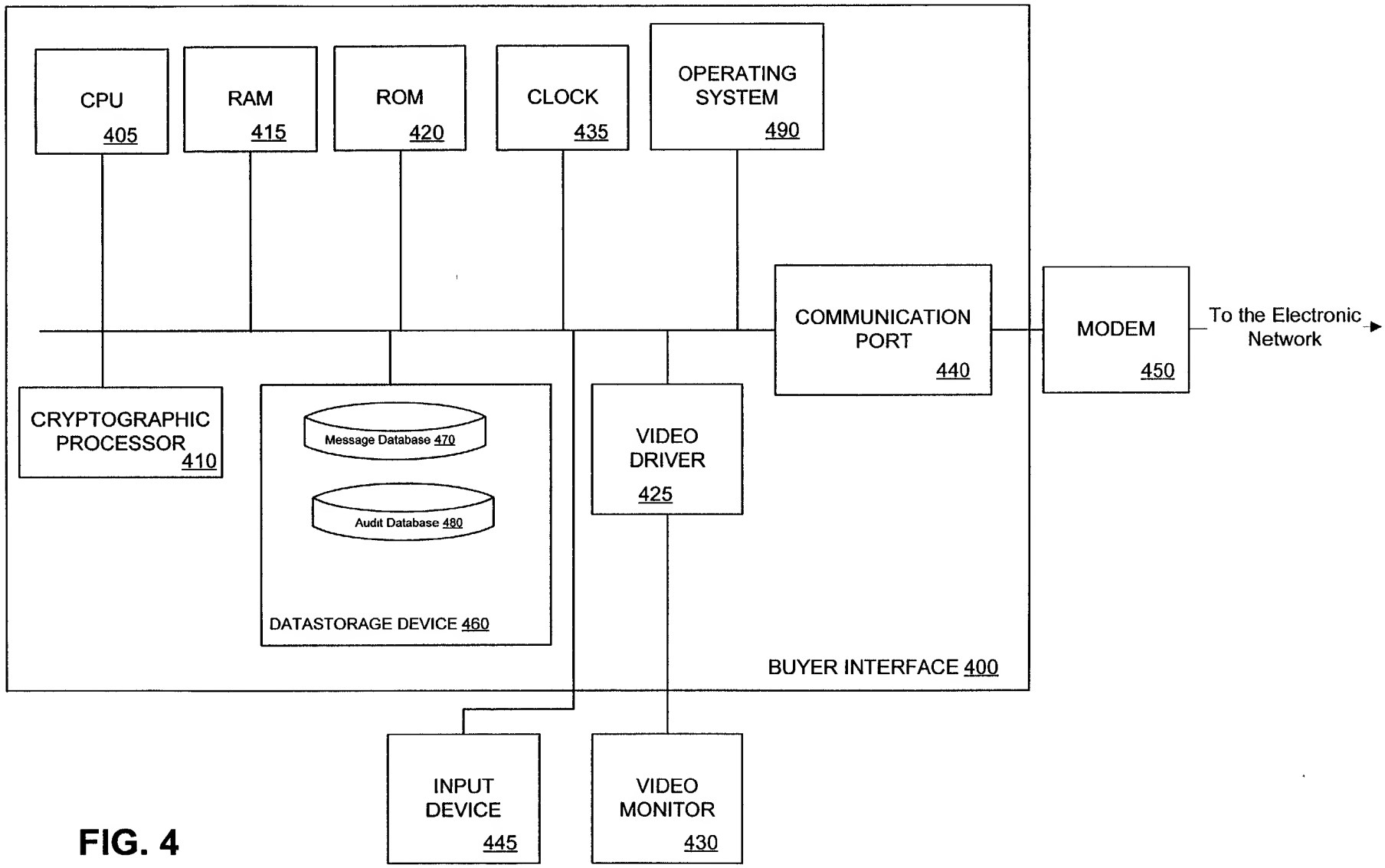
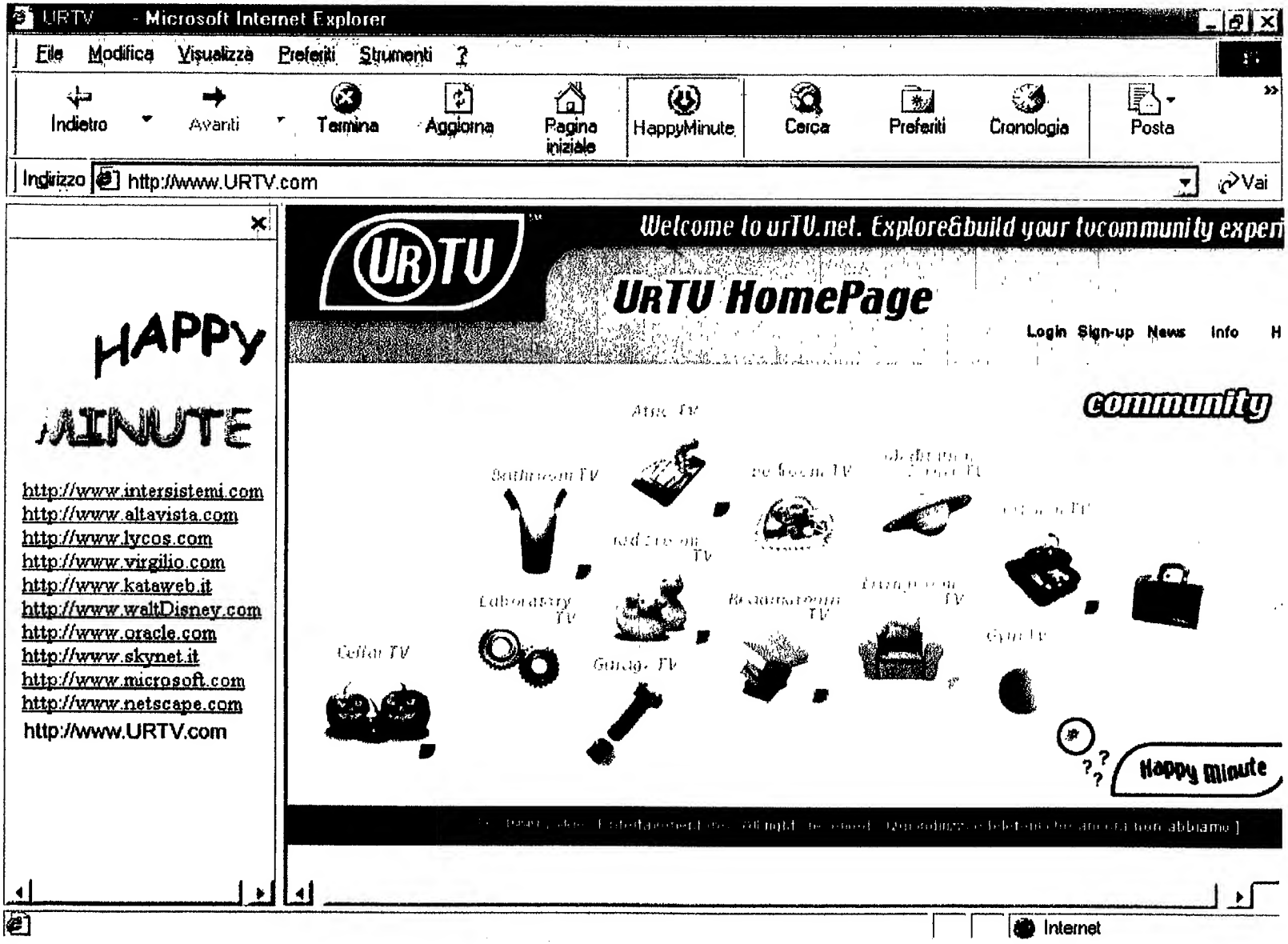

CPU
405
RAM
415
ROM
420
CLOCK
435
OPERATING SYSTEM
490
COMMUNICATION PORT
440
MODEM
450
To the Electronic Network
CRYPTOGRAPHIC PROCESSOR
410
Message Database 470
Audit Database 480
DATASTORAGE DEVICE 460
VIDEO DRIVER
425
BUYER INTERFACE 400
INPUT DEVICE
445
VIDEO MONITOR
430

FIG. 4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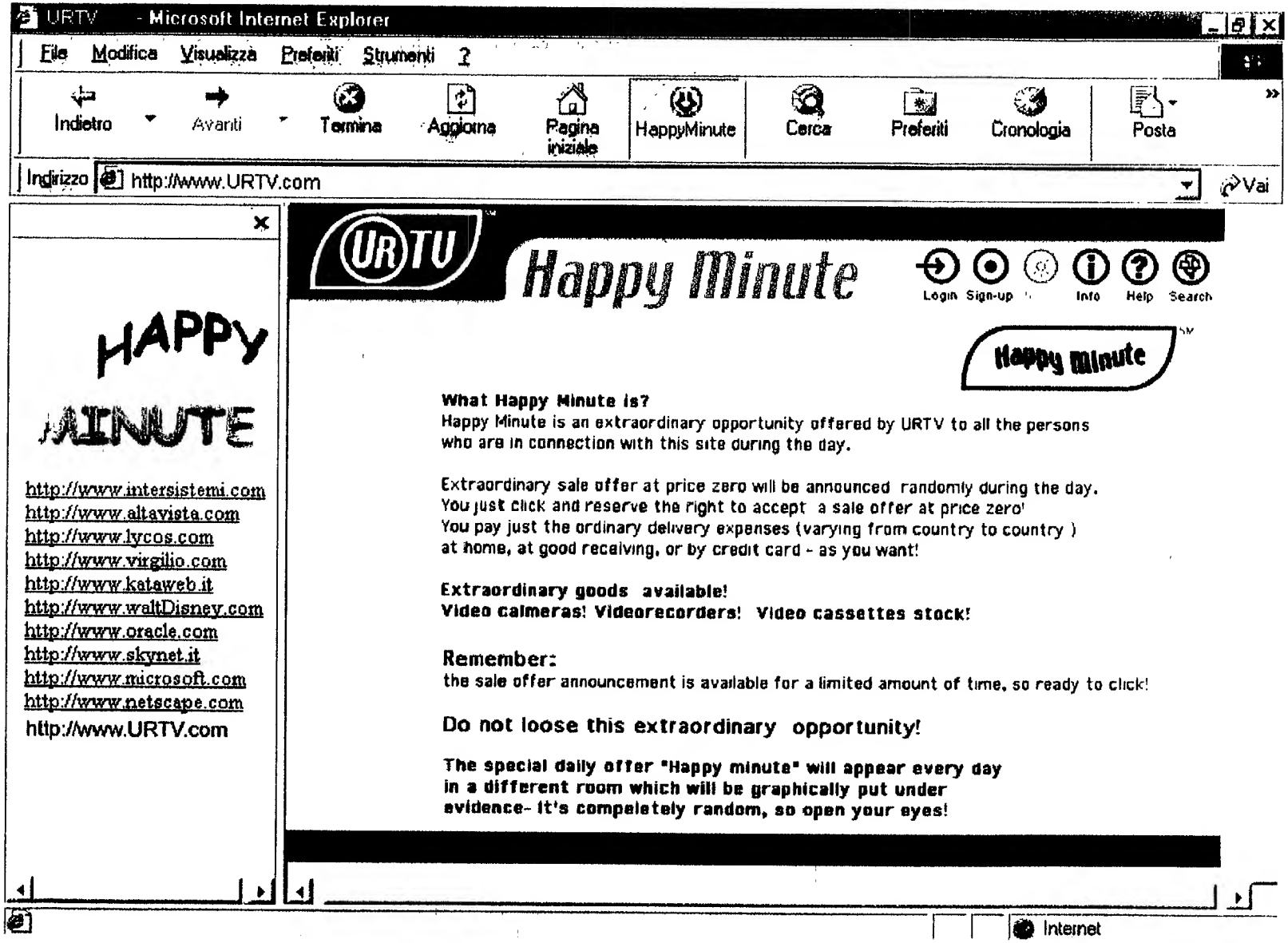
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
URTV
Welcome to urTV.net. Explore&build your tvcommunity experi
URTV HomePage
Login Sign-up News Info H
community
Happy Minute
Internet

FIG. 5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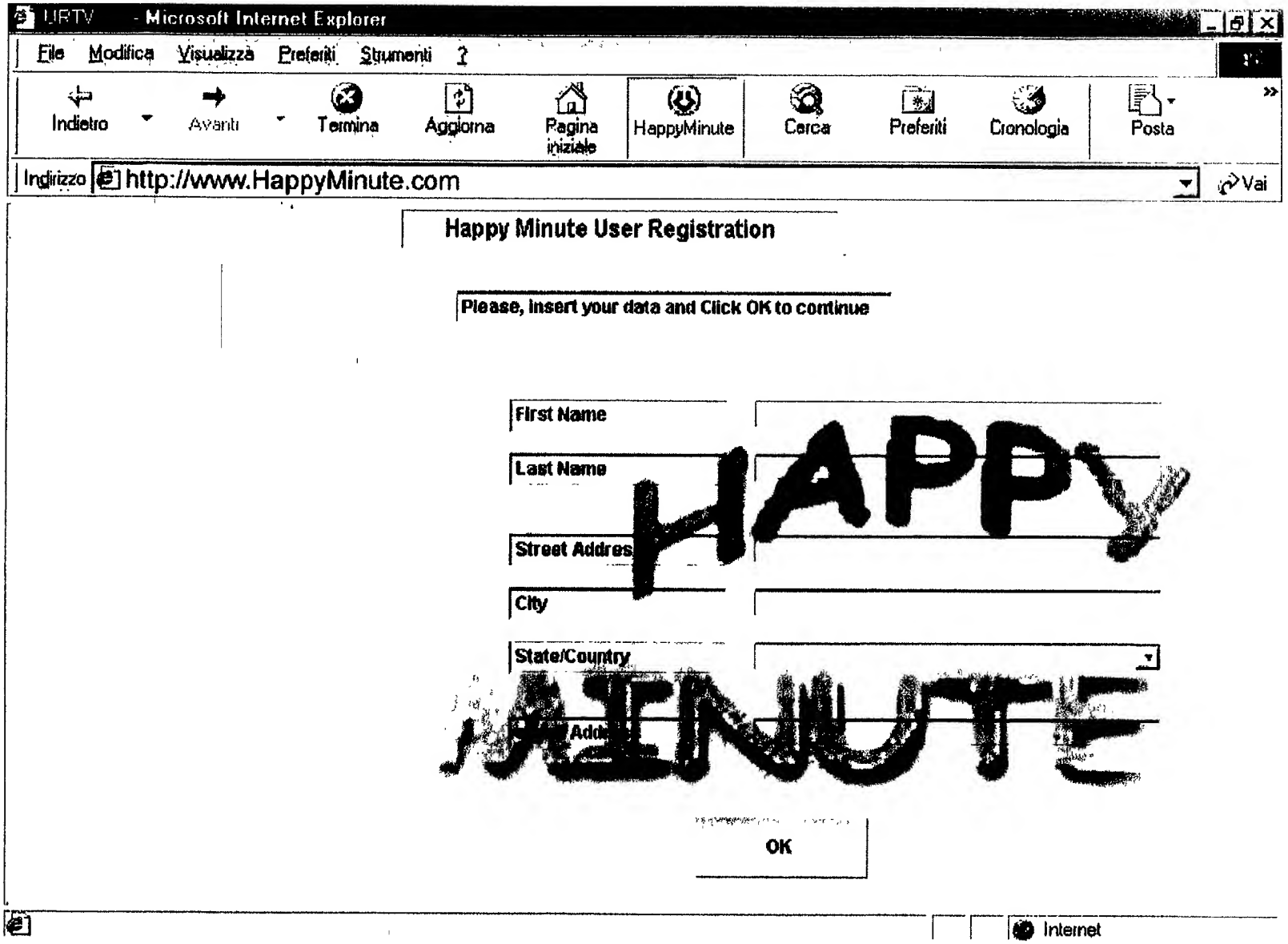
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
URTV
Happy Minute
Login
Sign-up
Info
Help
Search
Happy Minute
What Happy Minute is?
Happy Minute is an extraordinary opportunity offered by URTV to all the persons who are in connection with this site during the day.
Extraordinary sale offer at price zero will be announced randomly during the day.
You just click and reserve the right to accept a sale offer at price zero!
You pay just the ordinary delivery expenses (varying from country to country) at home, at good receiving, or by credit card - as you want!
Extraordinary goods available!
Video calmeras! Videorecorders! Video cassettes stock!
Remember:
the sale offer announcement is available for a limited amount of time, so ready to click!
Do not loose this extraordinary opportunity!
The special daily offer "Happy minute" will appear every day in a different room which will be graphically put under evidence- it's compeletely random, so open your eyes!
Internet

FIG. 6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Cerca
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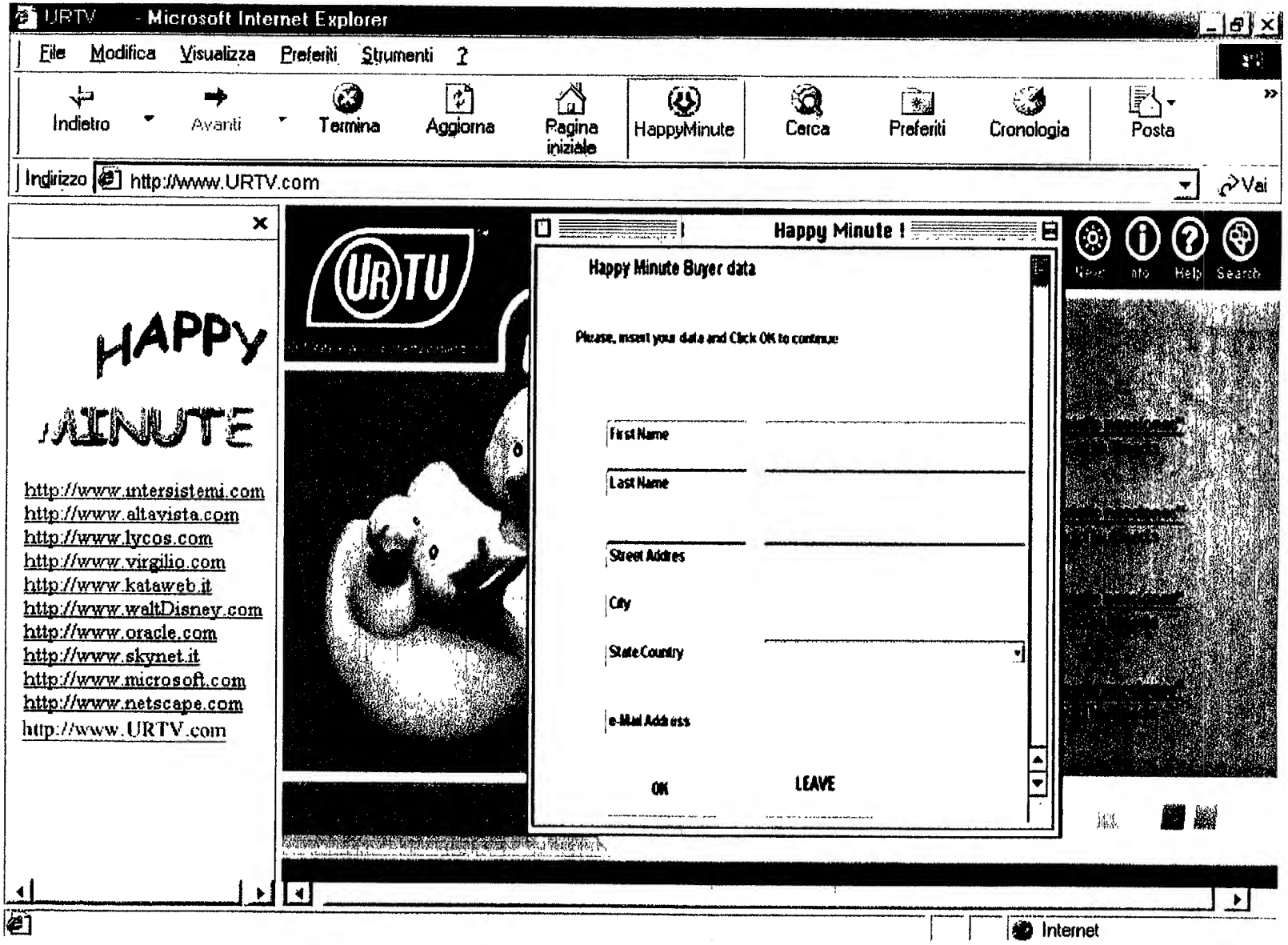
http://www.HappyMinute.com
Vai
Happy Minute User Registration
Please, insert your data and Click OK to continue
First Name
Last Name
Street Addres
City
State/Country
Add
OK
HAPPY MINUTE
Internet

FIG. 6a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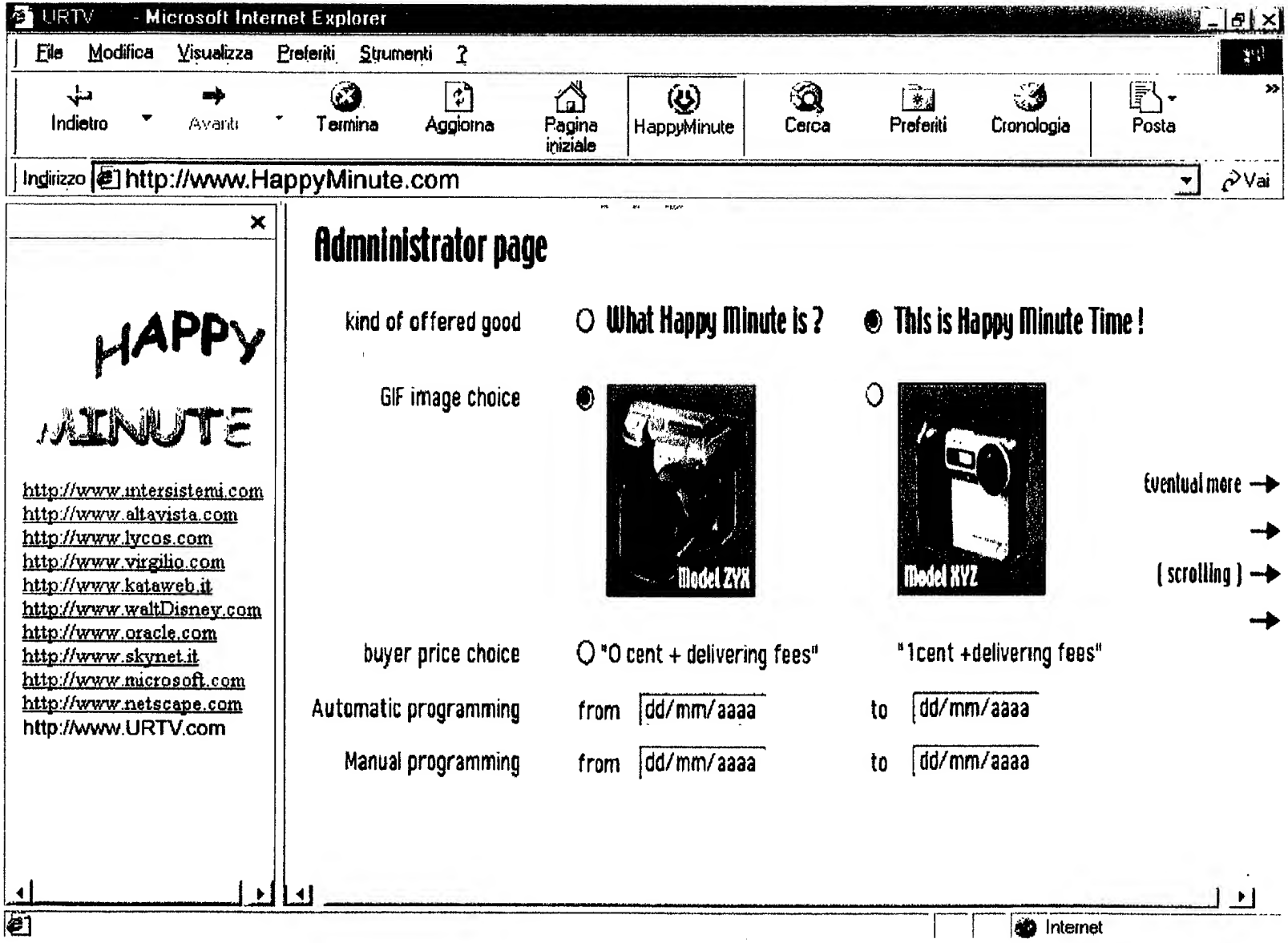
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
URTV
Happy Minute !
Happy Minute Buyer data
Please, insert your data and Click OK to continue
First Name
Last Name
Street Addres
City
State Country
e-Mail Address
OK
LEAVE
Internet

FIG. 6b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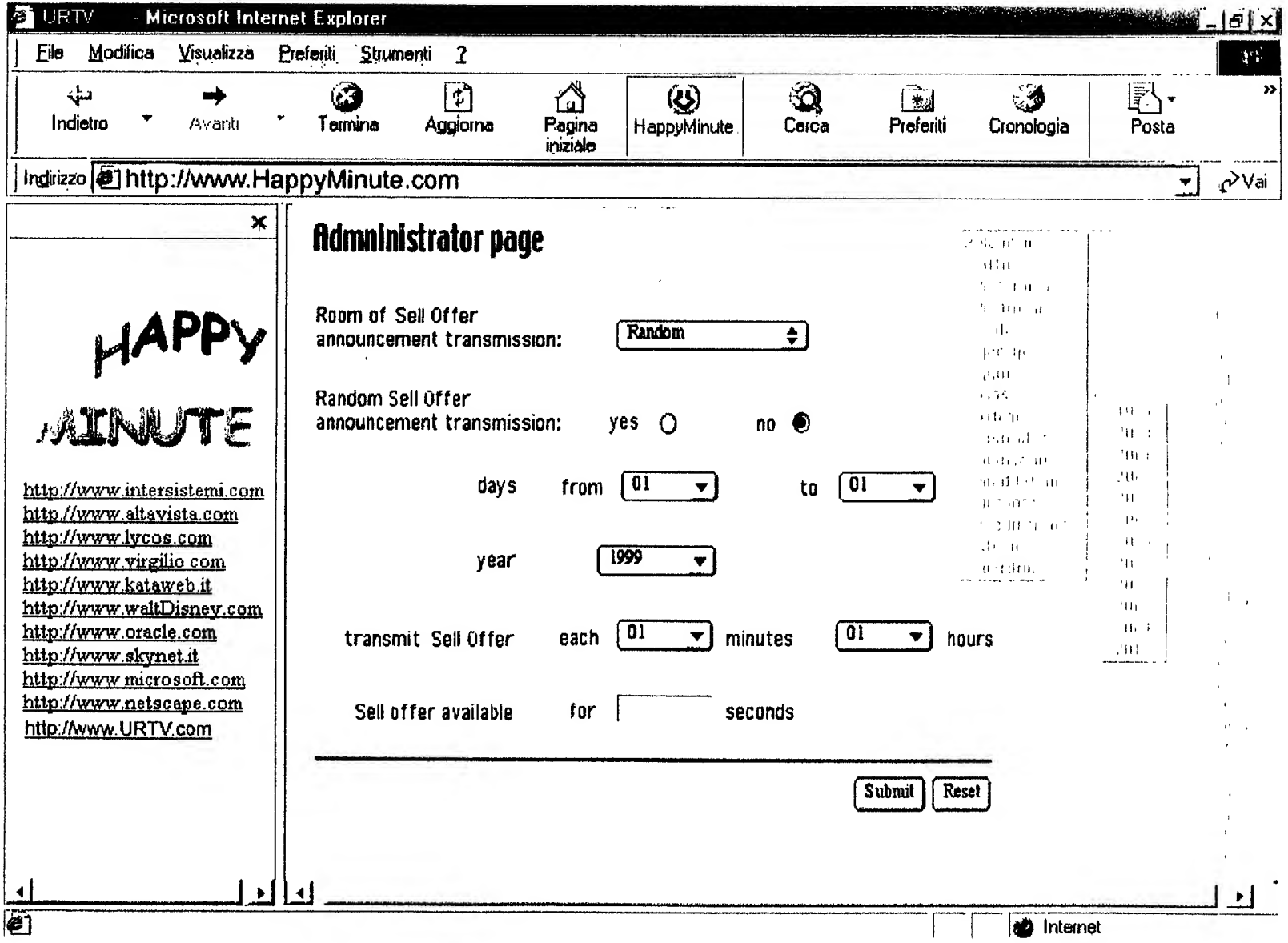
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Administrator page
kind of offered good
What Happy Minute is ?
This is Happy Minute Time !
GIF image choice
Model ZYX
Model XYZ
Eventual more
(scrolling)
buyer price choice
"0 cent + delivering fees"
"1cent +delivering fees"
Automatic programming
from dd/mm/aaaa
to dd/mm/aaaa
Manual programming
from dd/mm/aaaa
to dd/mm/aaaa
Internet

FIG. 7a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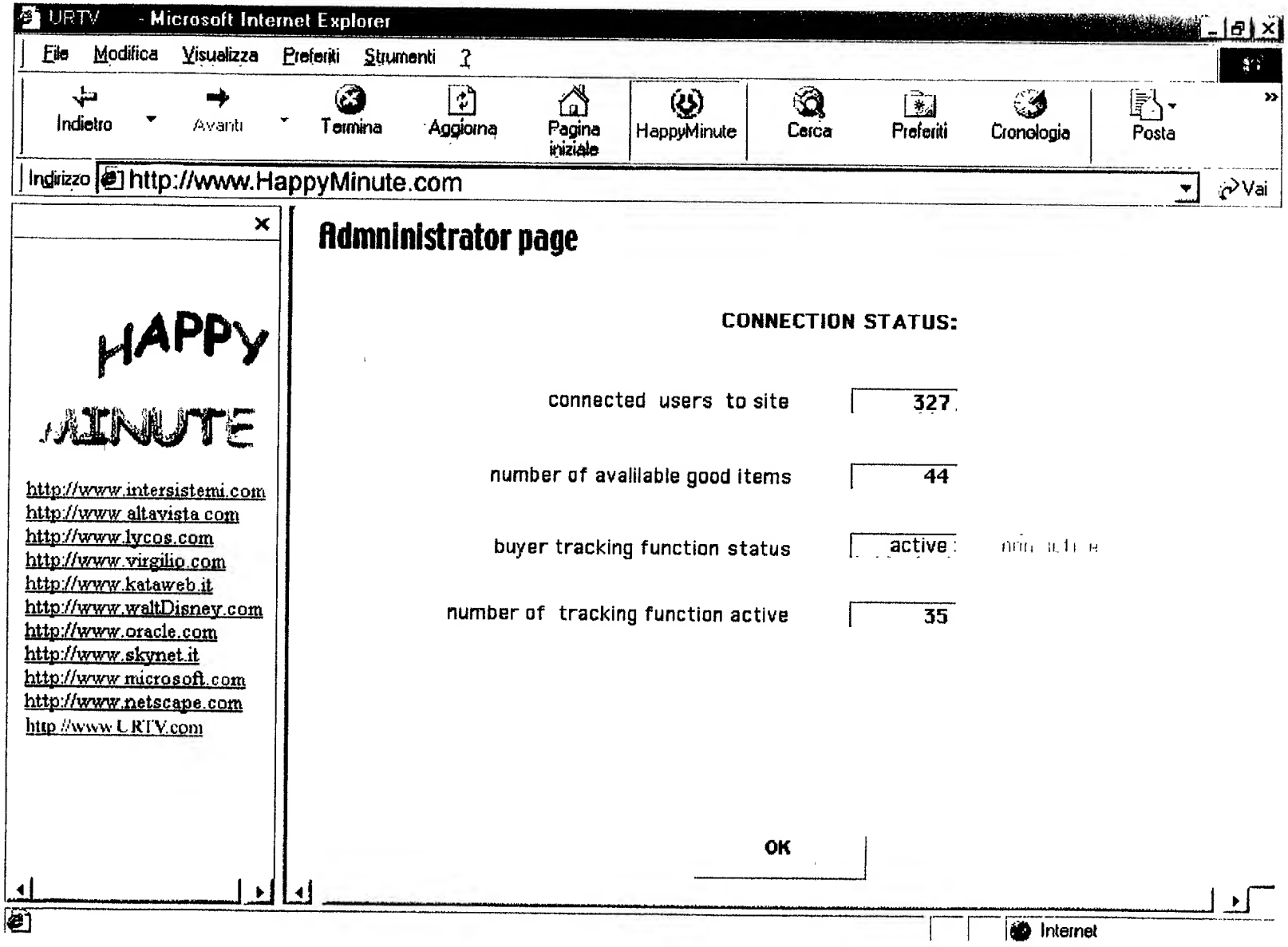
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Administrator page
Room of Sell Offer announcement transmission:
Random
Random Sell Offer announcement transmission:
yes
no
days from 01 to 01
year 1999
transmit Sell Offer each 01 minutes 01 hours
Sell offer available for seconds
Submit
Reset
Internet

FIG. 7b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http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Admninistrator page
CONNECTION STATUS:
connected users to site 327
number of avalilable good items 44
buyer tracking function status active
number of tracking function active 35
OK
Internet

FIG. 7c

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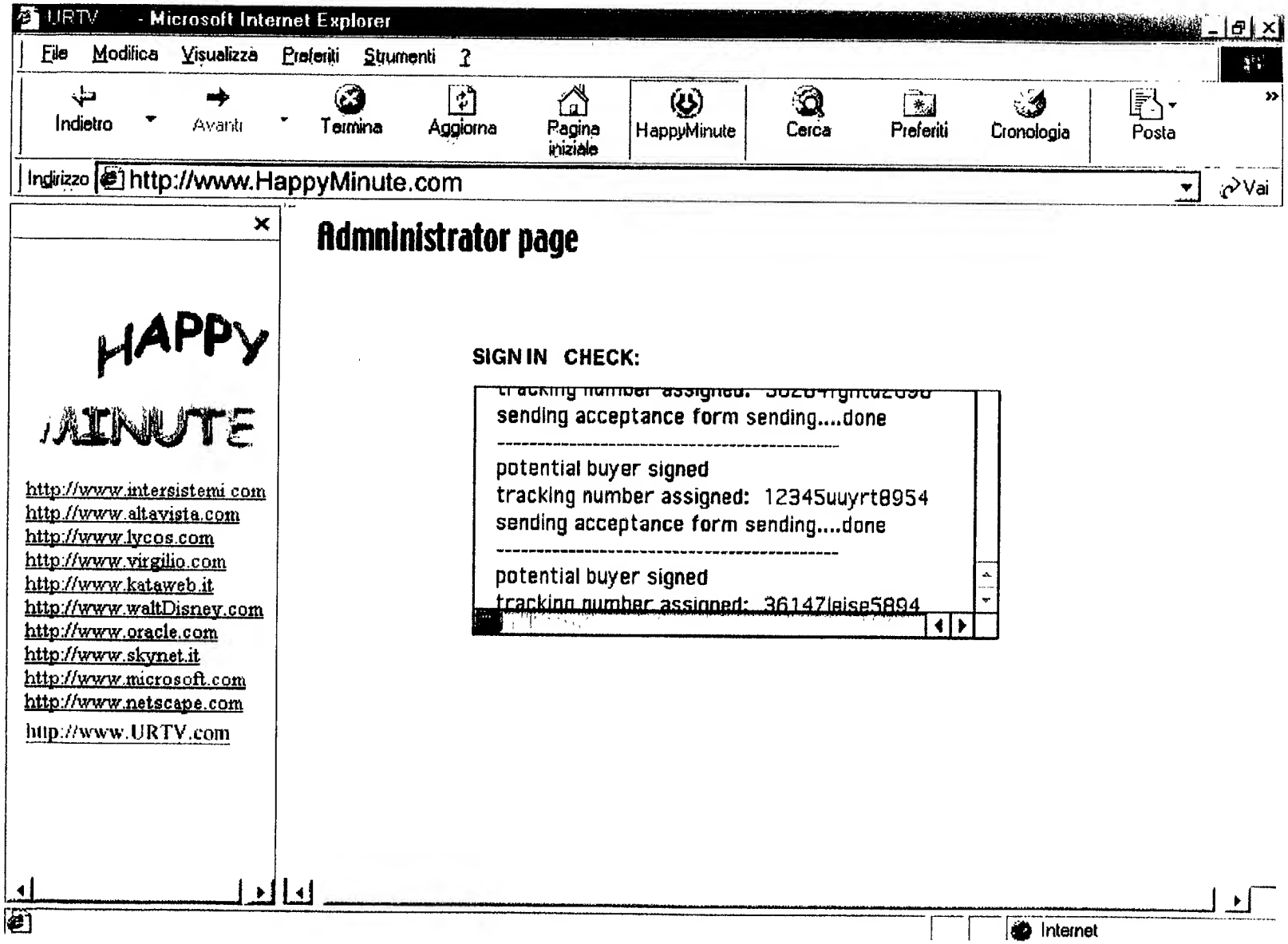
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
URTV
kids' room TV
Info
Help
Happy Minute !
Happy Minute
This is Happy Minute Time !
• Today available!
• A Sony video camera at zero cost!
• Pay only delivering cost for your country!
Model ZYX
Sign-in
Leave
Internet

FIG. 8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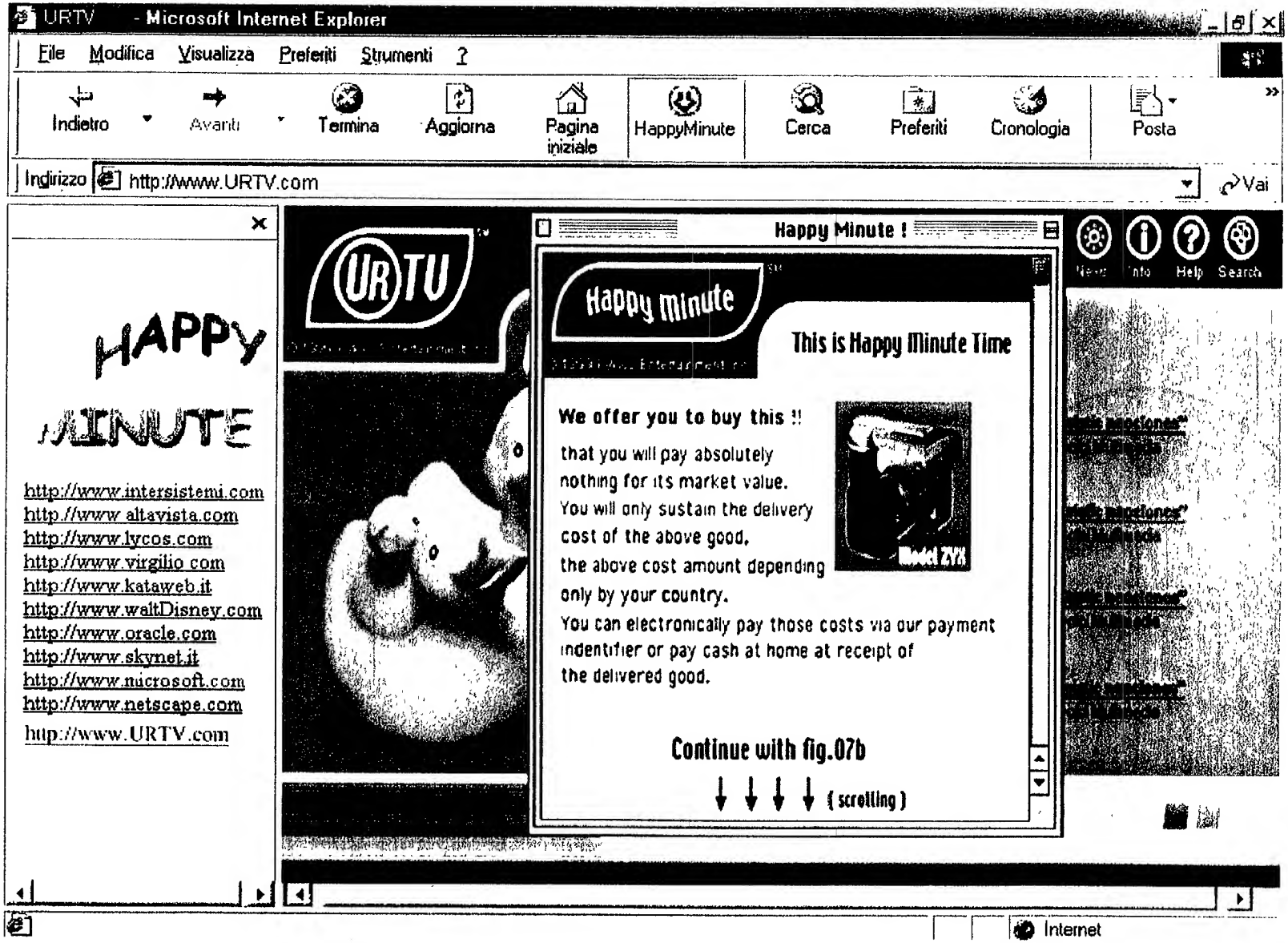
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Admninistrator page
SIGN IN CHECK:
sending acceptance form sending....done
potential buyer signed
tracking number assigned: 12345uuyrt8954
sending acceptance form sending....done
potential buyer signed
Internet

FIG. 9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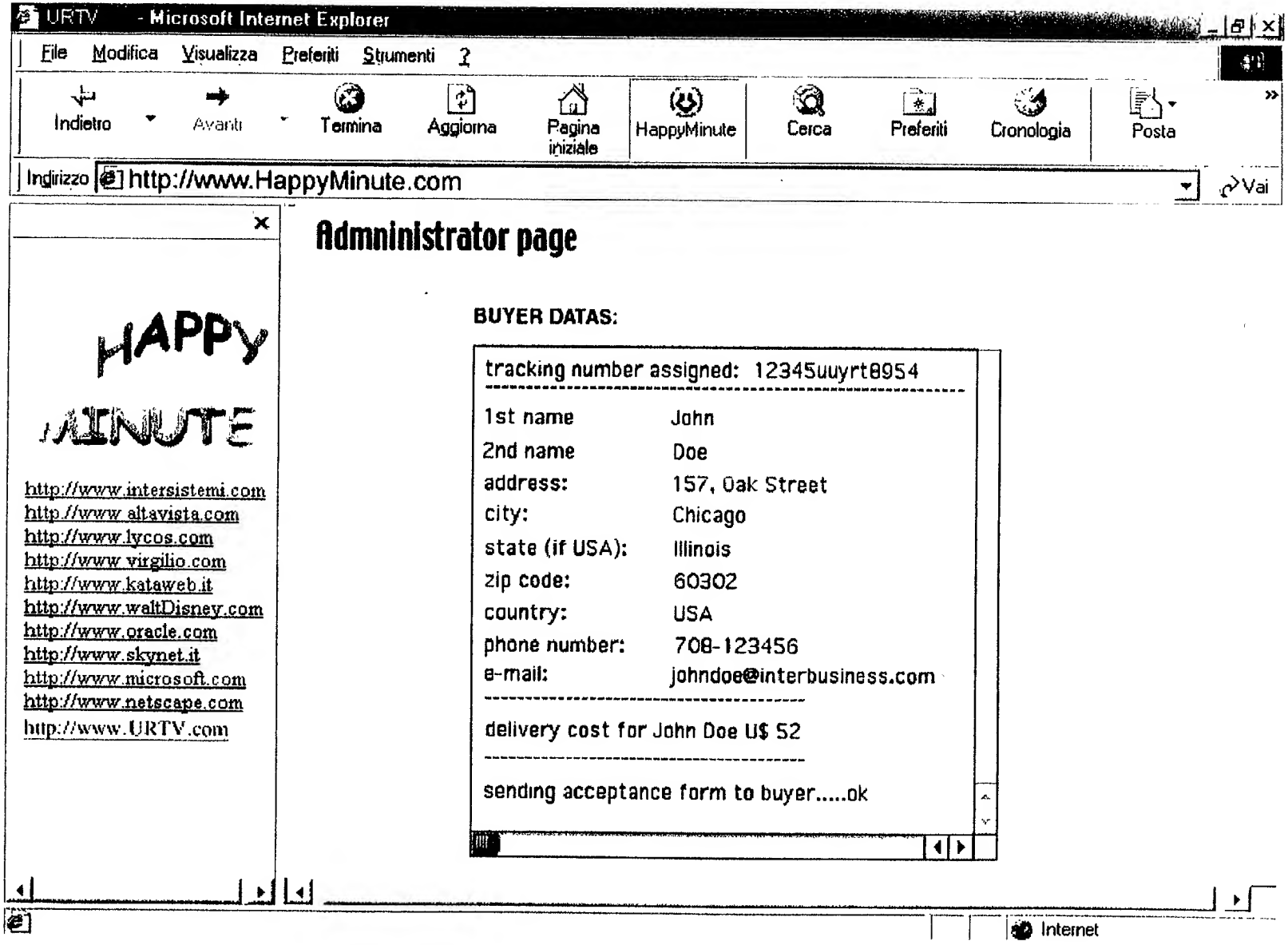
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
URTV
Happy Minute !
Happy minute
This is Happy Minute Time
We offer you to buy this !!
that you will pay absolutely
nothing for its market value.
You will only sustain the delivery
cost of the above good,
the above cost amount depending
only by your country.
You can electronically pay those costs via our payment
indentifier or pay cash at home at receipt of
the delivered good.
Continue with fig.07b
(scrolling)
News
Info
Help
Search
Internet

FIG. 10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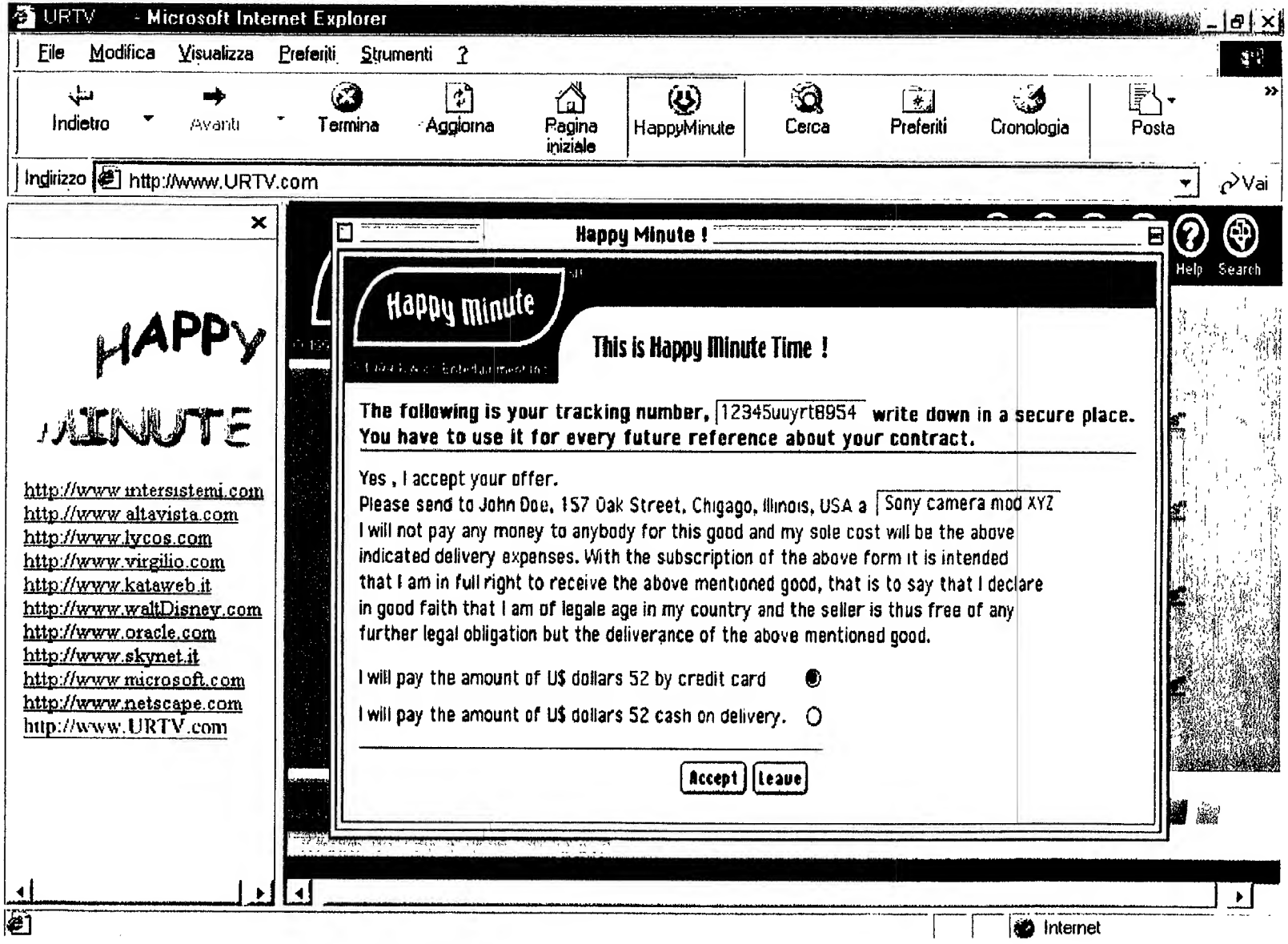
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Admninistrator page
BUYER DATAS:
tracking number assigned: 12345uuyrt8954
1st name John
2nd name Doe
address: 157, Oak Street
city: Chicago
state (if USA): Illinois
zip code: 60302
country: USA
phone number: 708-123456
e-mail: johndoe@interbusiness.com
delivery cost for John Doe U$ 52
sending acceptance form to buyer.....ok
Internet

FIG. 11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http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Happy Minute !
Happy Minute
This is Happy Minute Time !
Help
Search
The following is your tracking number, 12345uuyrt8954 write down in a secure place.
You have to use it for every future reference about your contract.
Yes , I accept your offer.
Please send to John Doe, 157 Oak Street, Chigago, Illinois, USA a Sony camera mod XYZ
I will not pay any money to anybody for this good and my sole cost will be the above indicated delivery expenses. With the subscription of the above form it is intended that I am in full right to receive the above mentioned good, that is to say that I declare in good faith that I am of legale age in my country and the seller is thus free of any further legal obligation but the deliverance of the above mentioned good.
I will pay the amount of U$ dollars 52 by credit card
I will pay the amount of U$ dollars 52 cash on delivery.
Accept
Leave
Internet

FIG. 12

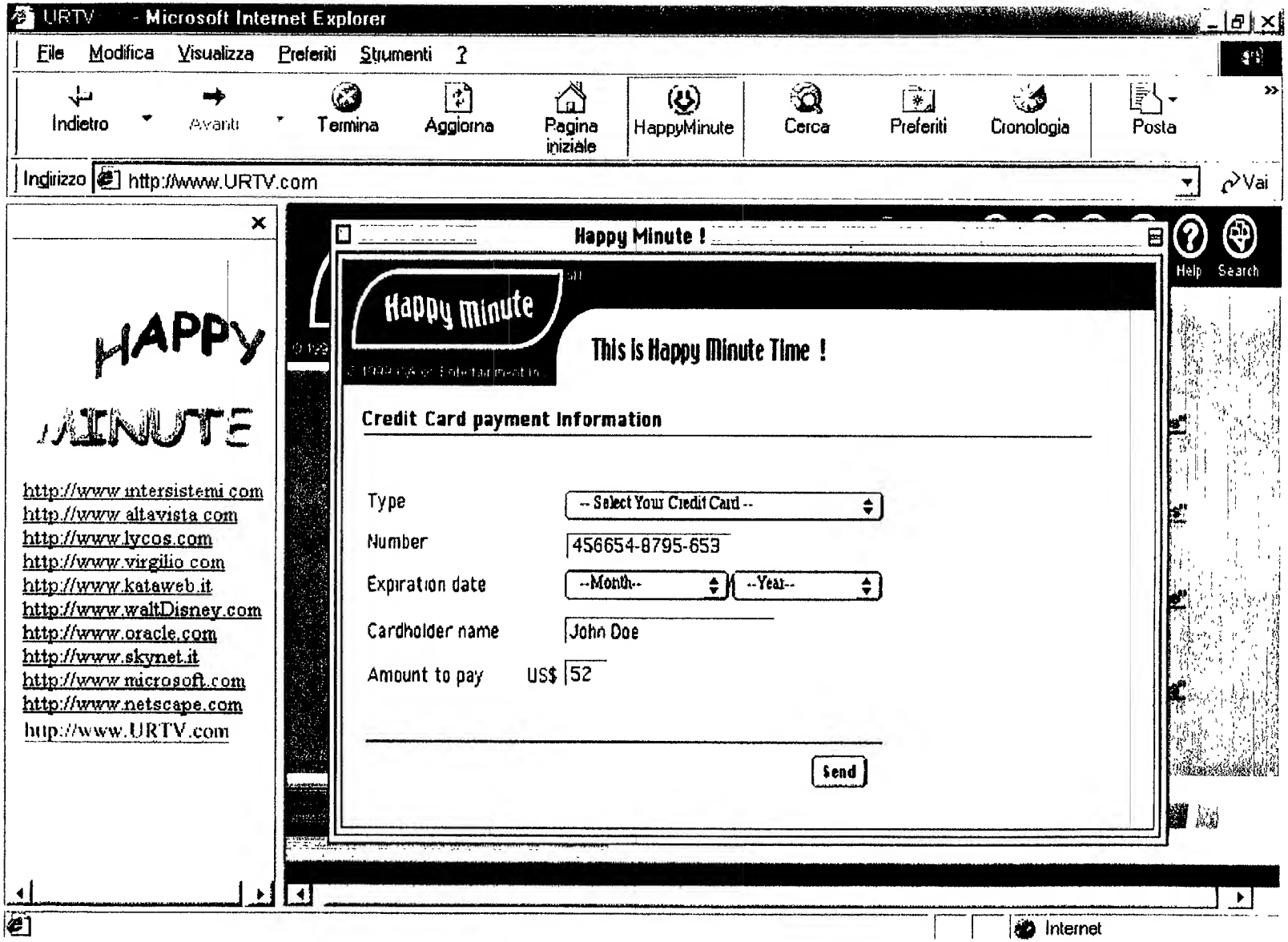
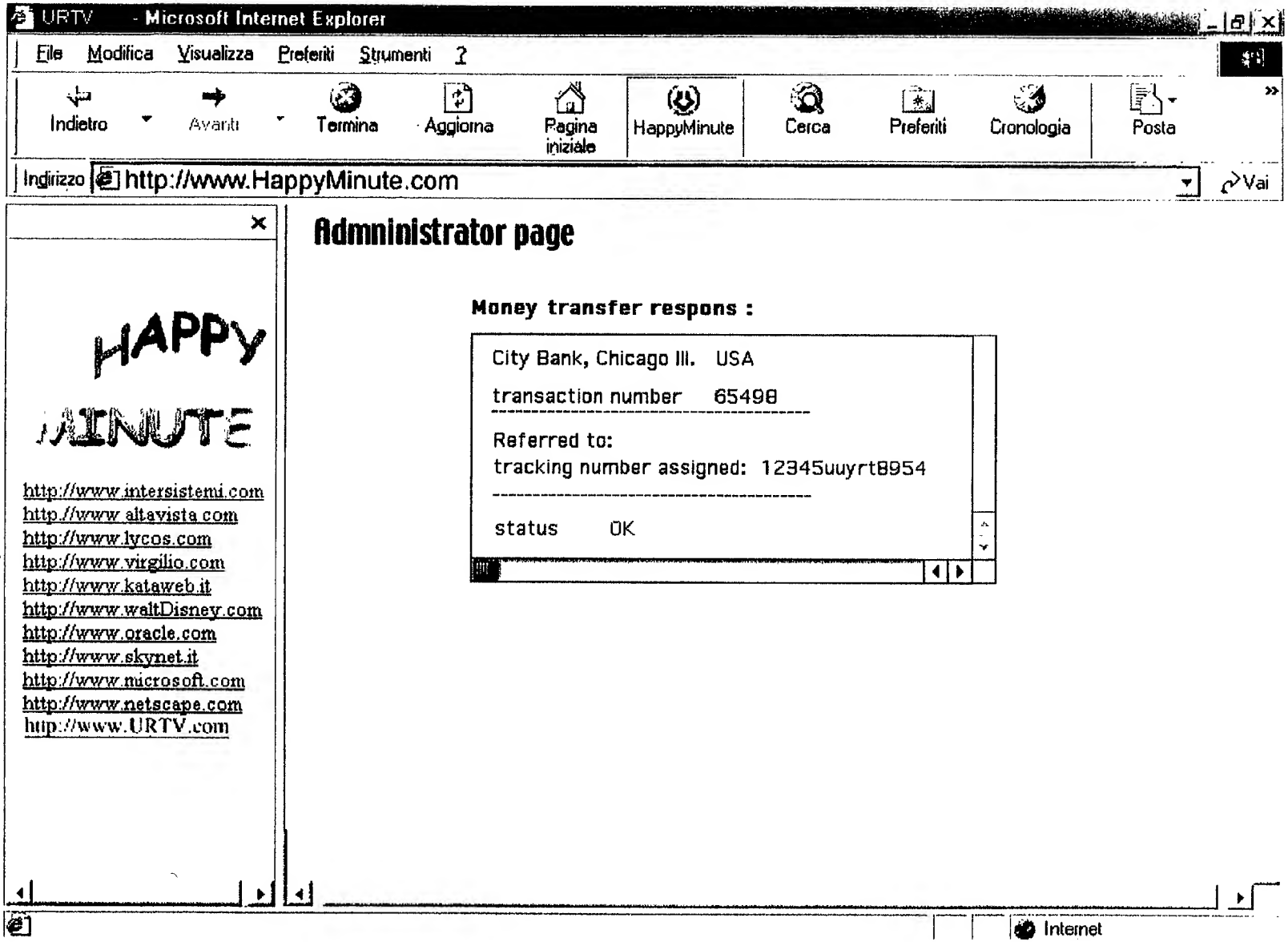

URTV - Microsoft Internet Explorer
File Modifica Visualizza Preferiti Strumenti ?
Indietro
Avanti
Termina
Aggiorna
Pagina iniziale
HappyMinute
Cerca
Preferiti
Cronologia
Posta
Indirizzo http://www.URTV.com
Vai
HAPPY MINUTE
http://www.intersistemi.com
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Happy Minute !
Help
Search
Happy Minute
This is Happy Minute Time !
Credit Card payment Information
Type
-- Select Your Credit Card --
Number
456654-8795-653
Expiration date
--Month--
--Year--
Cardholder name
John Doe
Amount to pay
US$
52
Send
Internet

FIG. 13


URTV - Microsoft Internet Explorer
File Modifica Visualizza Preferiti Strumenti ?
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Termina
Aggiorna
Pagina iniziale
HappyMinute
Cerca
Preferiti
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http://www.HappyMinute.com
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http://www.intersistemi.com
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Admninistrator page
Money transfer respons :
City Bank, Chicago Ill. USA
transaction number 65498
Referred to:
tracking number assigned: 12345uuyrt8954
status OK
Internet

FIG. 14

URTV - Microsoft Internet Explorer
File Modifica Visualizza Preferiti Strumenti ?
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Aggiorna
Pagina iniziale
HappyMinute
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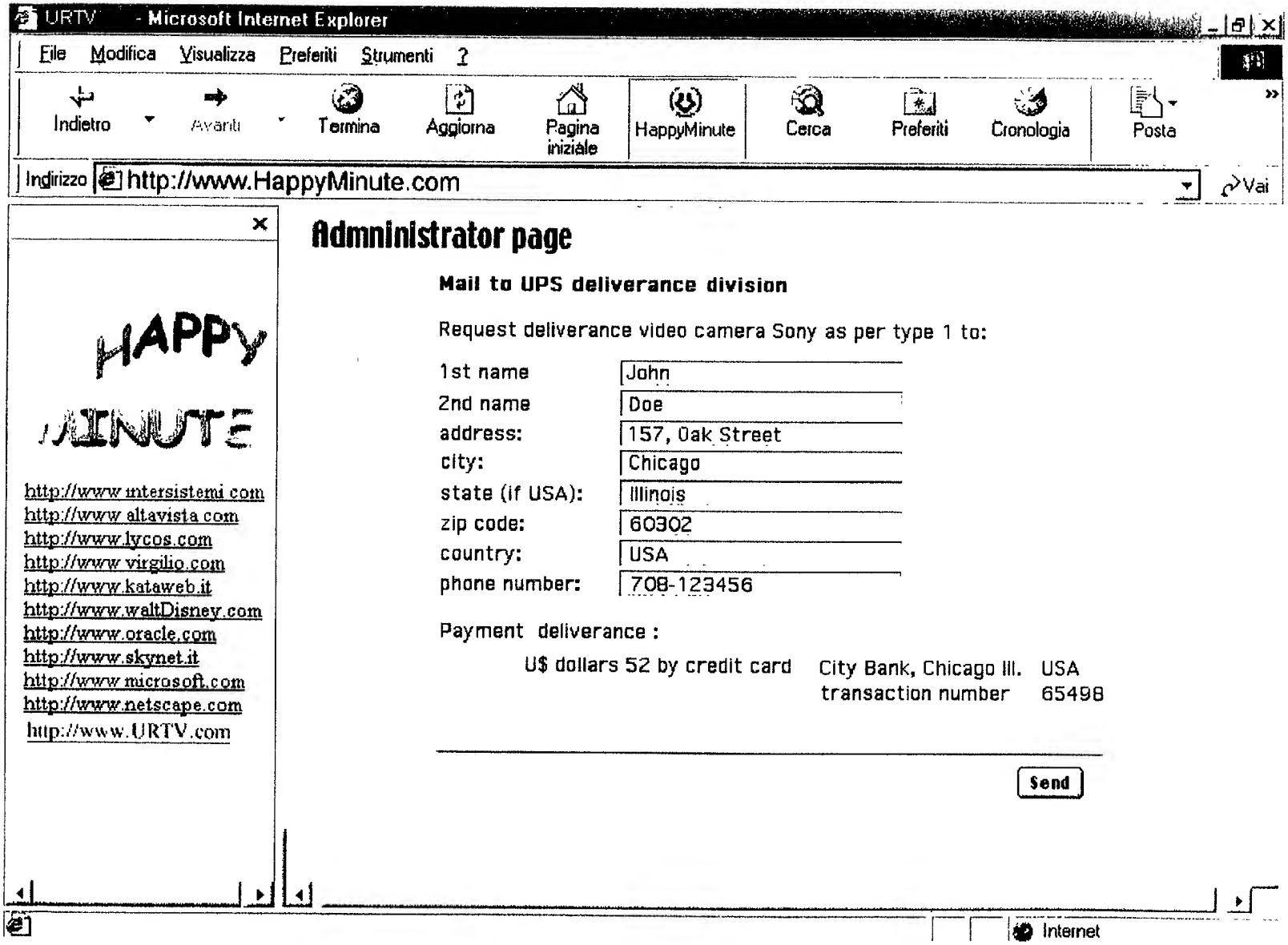
Preferiti
Cronologia
Posta
Indirizzo http://www.URTV.com
Vai
HAPPY MINUTE
http://www.intersistemi.com
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
URTV
Kids' room TV
Community
Help
Search
Happy Minute !
Happy Minute
This is Happy Minute Time !
The money transfer has been successfully completed.
You will receive the Sony camera mod XYZ in a few days.
kid's room TV
Internet

FIG. 15


URTV - Microsoft Internet Explorer
File Modifica Visualizza Preferiti Strumenti ?
Indietro
Avanti
Termina
Aggiorna
Pagina iniziale
HappyMinute
Cerca
Preferiti
Cronologia
Posta
Indirizzo
http://www.HappyMinute.com
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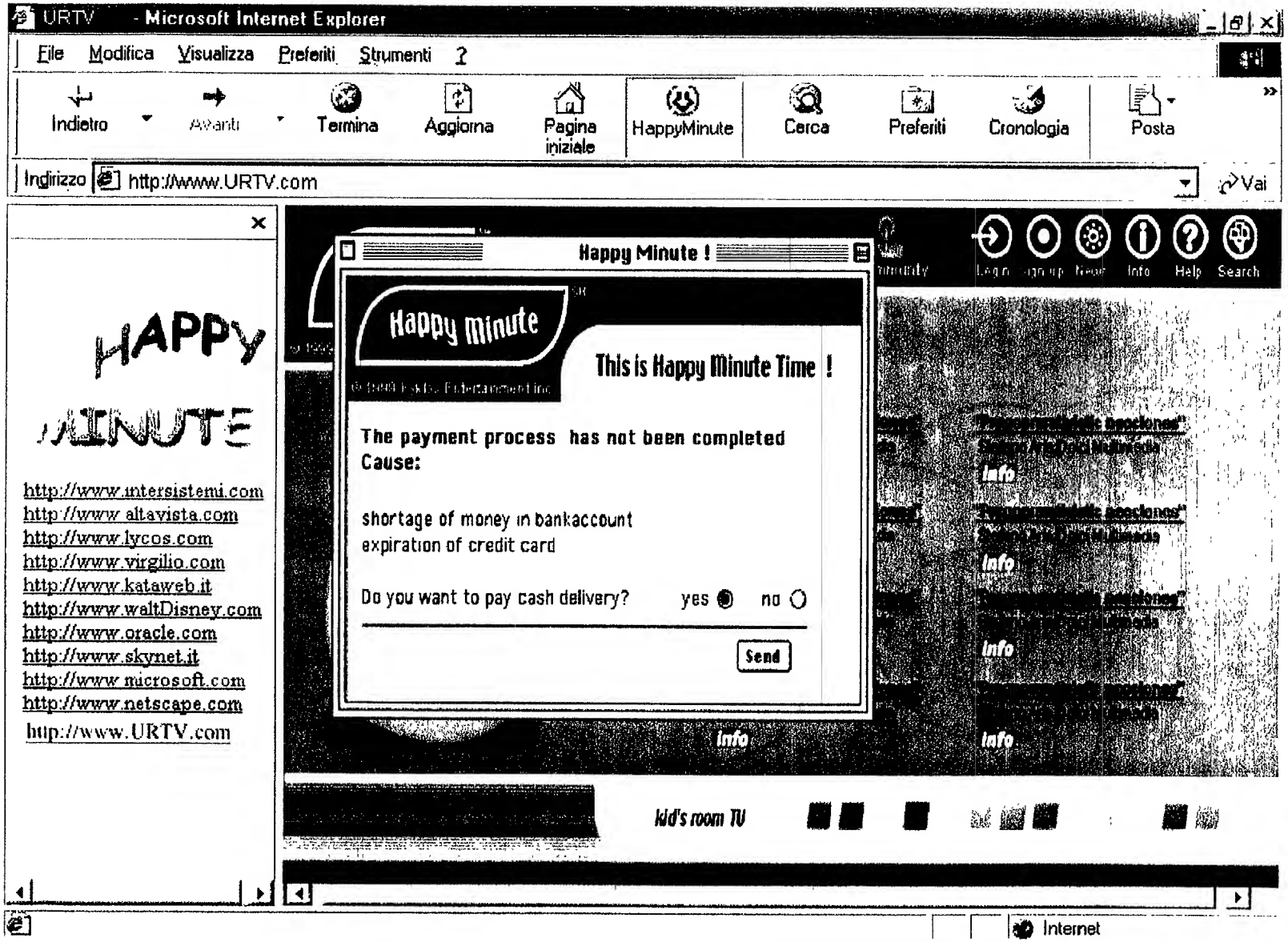
MINUTE
http://www.intersistemi.com
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Admninistrator page
Mail to UPS deliverance division
Request deliverance video camera Sony as per type 1 to:
1st name John
2nd name Doe
address: 157, Oak Street
city: Chicago
state (if USA): Illinois
zip code: 60302
country: USA
phone number: 708-123456
Payment deliverance :
U$ dollars 52 by credit card
City Bank, Chicago Ill. USA
transaction number 65498
Send
Internet

FIG. 16


URTV - Microsoft Internet Explorer
File Modifica Visualizza Preferiti Strumenti ?
Indietro
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Termina
Aggiorna
Pagina iniziale
HappyMinute
Cerca
Preferiti
Cronologia
Posta
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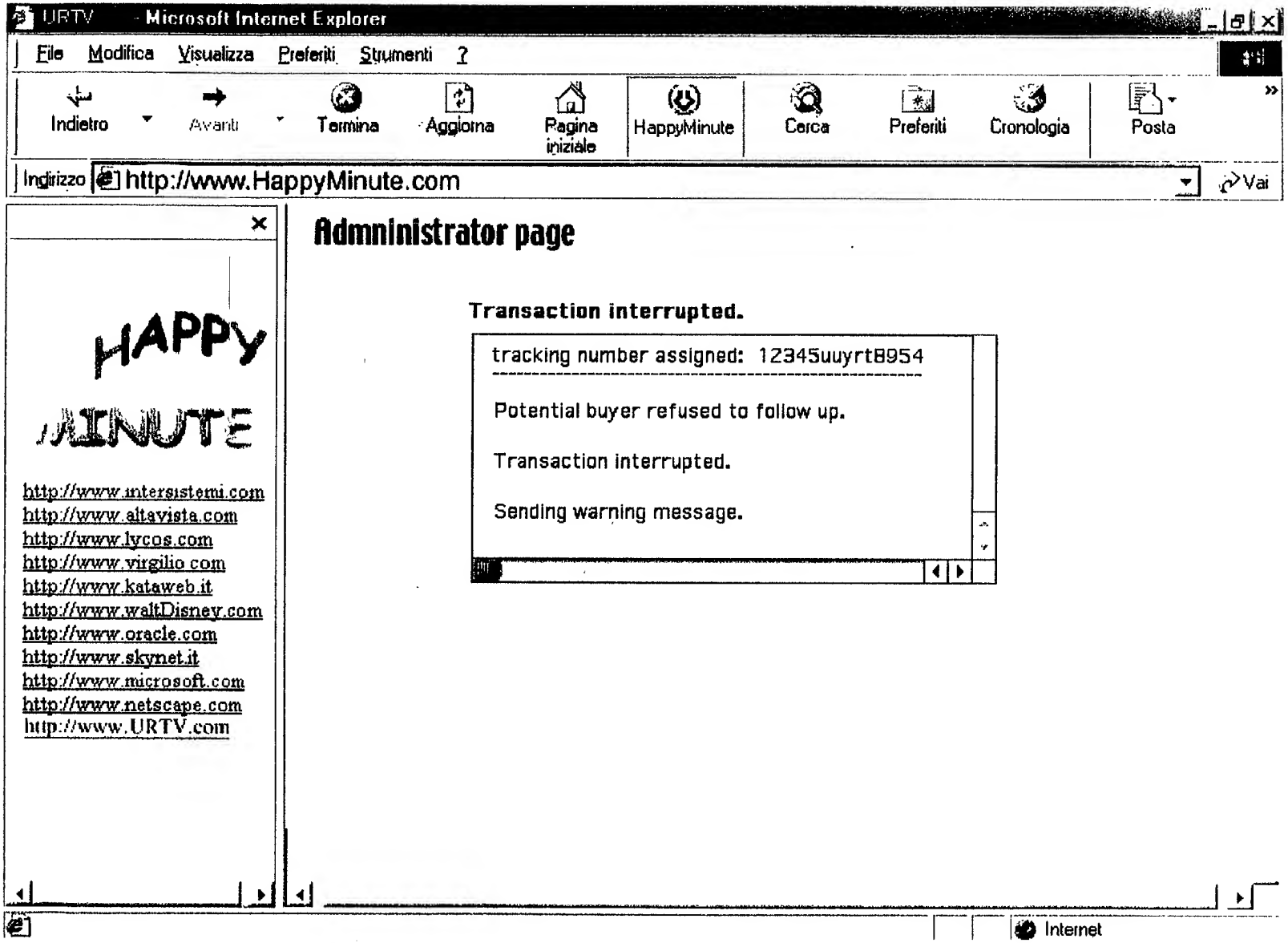
HAPPY MINUTE
http://www.intersistemi.com
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Happy Minute !
Happy Minute
This is Happy Minute Time !
The payment process has not been completed
Cause:
shortage of money in bankaccount
expiration of credit card
Do you want to pay cash delivery? yes no
Send
Info
Help
Search
kid's room TV
Internet

FIG. 17


URTV - Microsoft Internet Explorer
File Modifica Visualizza Preferiti Strumenti ?
Indietro
Avanti
Termina
Aggiorna
Pagina iniziale
HappyMinute
Cerca
Preferiti
Cronologia
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http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Admninistrator page
Transaction interrupted.
tracking number assigned: 12345uuyrt8954
Potential buyer refused to follow up.
Transaction interrupted.
Sending warning message.
Internet

FIG. 18

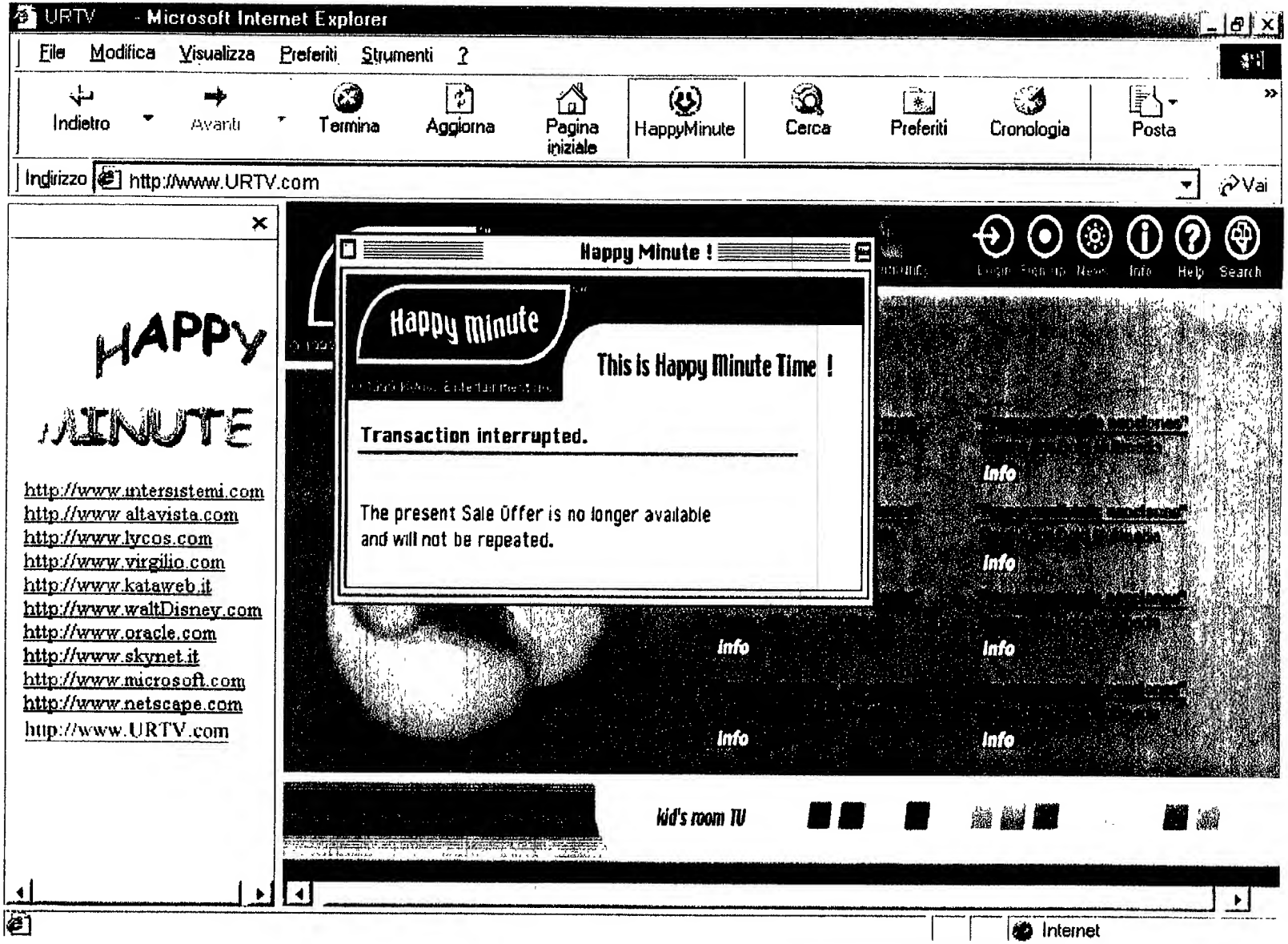
URTV - Microsoft Internet Explorer
File Modifica Visualizza Preferiti Strumenti ?
Indietro
Avanti
Termina
Aggiorna
Pagina iniziale
HappyMinute
Cerca
Preferiti
Cronologia
Posta
Indirizzo
http://www.URTV.com
Vai
HAPPY MINUTE
http://www.intersistemi.com
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
Happy Minute !
Happy Minute
This is Happy Minute Time !
Transaction interrupted.
The present Sale Offer is no longer available
and will not be repeated.
Login
Sign up
News
Info
Help
Search
info
kid's room TV
Internet

FIG. 19

URTV - Microsoft Internet Explorer
File Modifica Visualizza Preferiti Strumenti ?
Indietro
Avanti
Termina
Aggiorna
Pagina iniziale
HappyMinute
Cerca
Preferiti
Cronologia
Posta
Indirizzo
http://www.URTV.com
Vai
HAPPY MINUTE
http://www.intersistemi.com
http://www.altavista.com
http://www.lycos.com
http://www.virgilio.com
http://www.kataweb.it
http://www.waltDisney.com
http://www.oracle.com
http://www.skynet.it
http://www.microsoft.com
http://www.netscape.com
http://www.URTV.com
URTV
Info
Help
Search
Happy Minute !
Happy Minute
This is Happy Minute Time !
Warning: you clicked on "leave" button.
The present Sale Offer announcement will be cancelled and will not appear again.
Thanks for remaining on URTV!
kid's room TV
Internet

FIG. 20

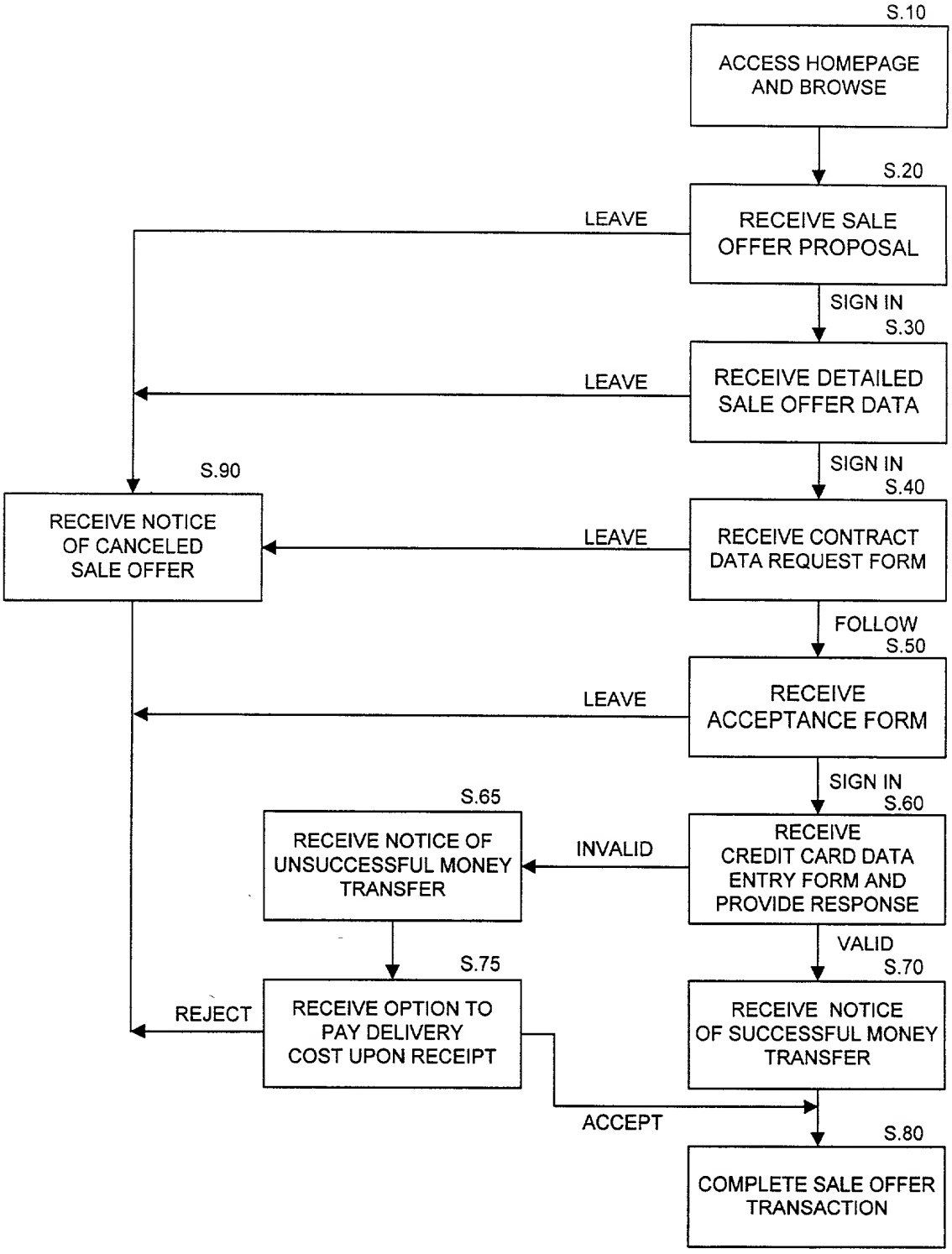
S.10
ACCESS HOMEPAGE AND BROWSE
S.20
RECEIVE SALE OFFER PROPOSAL
LEAVE
SIGN IN
S.30
RECEIVE DETAILED SALE OFFER DATA
LEAVE
SIGN IN
S.40
RECEIVE CONTRACT DATA REQUEST FORM
LEAVE
FOLLOW
S.50
RECEIVE ACCEPTANCE FORM
LEAVE
SIGN IN
S.60
RECEIVE CREDIT CARD DATA ENTRY FORM AND PROVIDE RESPONSE
INVALID
S.65
RECEIVE NOTICE OF UNSUCCESSFUL MONEY TRANSFER
VALID
S.70
RECEIVE NOTICE OF SUCCESSFUL MONEY TRANSFER
S.75
RECEIVE OPTION TO PAY DELIVERY COST UPON RECEIPT
REJECT
ACCEPT
S.80
COMPLETE SALE OFFER TRANSACTION
S.90
RECEIVE NOTICE OF CANCELED SALE OFFER

FIG. 21

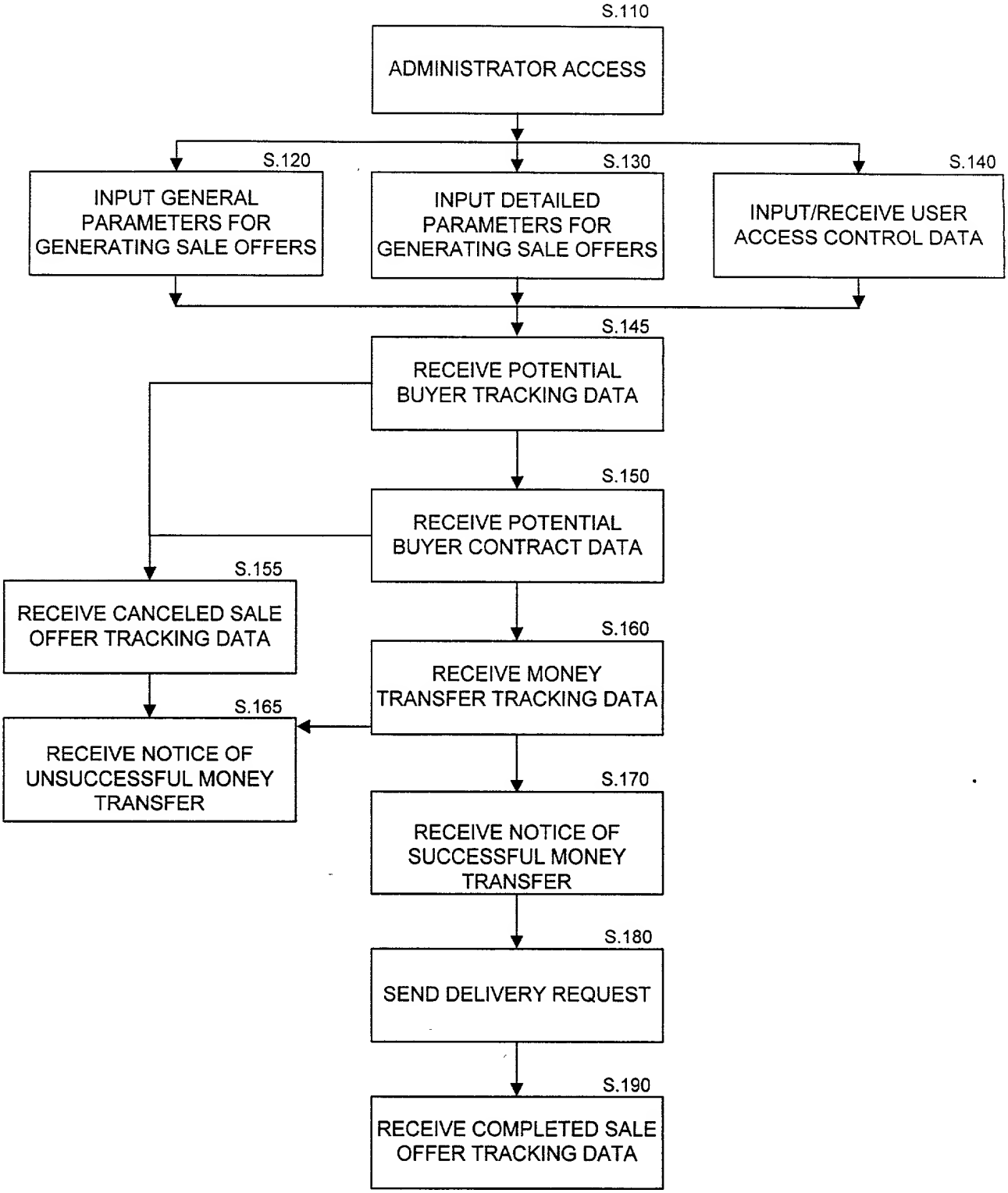
S.110
ADMINISTRATOR ACCESS
S.120
INPUT GENERAL PARAMETERS FOR GENERATING SALE OFFERS
S.130
INPUT DETAILED PARAMETERS FOR GENERATING SALE OFFERS
S.140
INPUT/RECEIVE USER ACCESS CONTROL DATA
S.145
RECEIVE POTENTIAL BUYER TRACKING DATA
S.150
RECEIVE POTENTIAL BUYER CONTRACT DATA
S.155
RECEIVE CANCELED SALE OFFER TRACKING DATA
S.160
RECEIVE MONEY TRANSFER TRACKING DATA
S.165
RECEIVE NOTICE OF UNSUCCESSFUL MONEY TRANSFER
S.170
RECEIVE NOTICE OF SUCCESSFUL MONEY TRANSFER
S.180
SEND DELIVERY REQUEST
S.190
RECEIVE COMPLETED SALE OFFER TRACKING DATA

FIG. 22

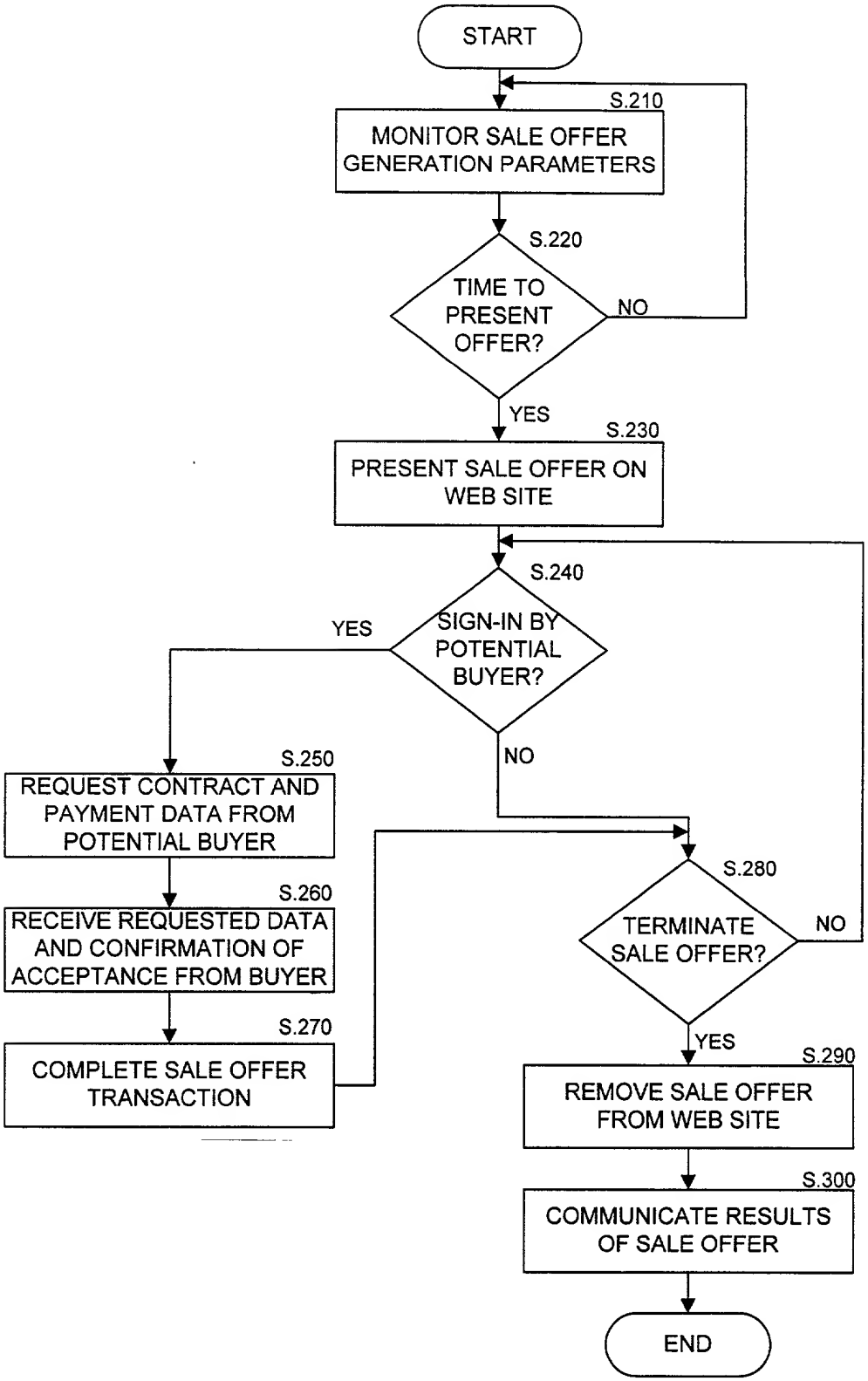
START
S.210
MONITOR SALE OFFER GENERATION PARAMETERS
S.220
TIME TO PRESENT OFFER?
NO
YES
S.230
PRESENT SALE OFFER ON WEB SITE
S.240
SIGN-IN BY POTENTIAL BUYER?
YES
NO
S.250
REQUEST CONTRACT AND PAYMENT DATA FROM POTENTIAL BUYER
S.260
RECEIVE REQUESTED DATA AND CONFIRMATION OF ACCEPTANCE FROM BUYER
S.270
COMPLETE SALE OFFER TRANSACTION
S.280
TERMINATE SALE OFFER?
NO
YES
S.290
REMOVE SALE OFFER FROM WEB SITE
S.300
COMMUNICATE RESULTS OF SALE OFFER
END

FIG. 23

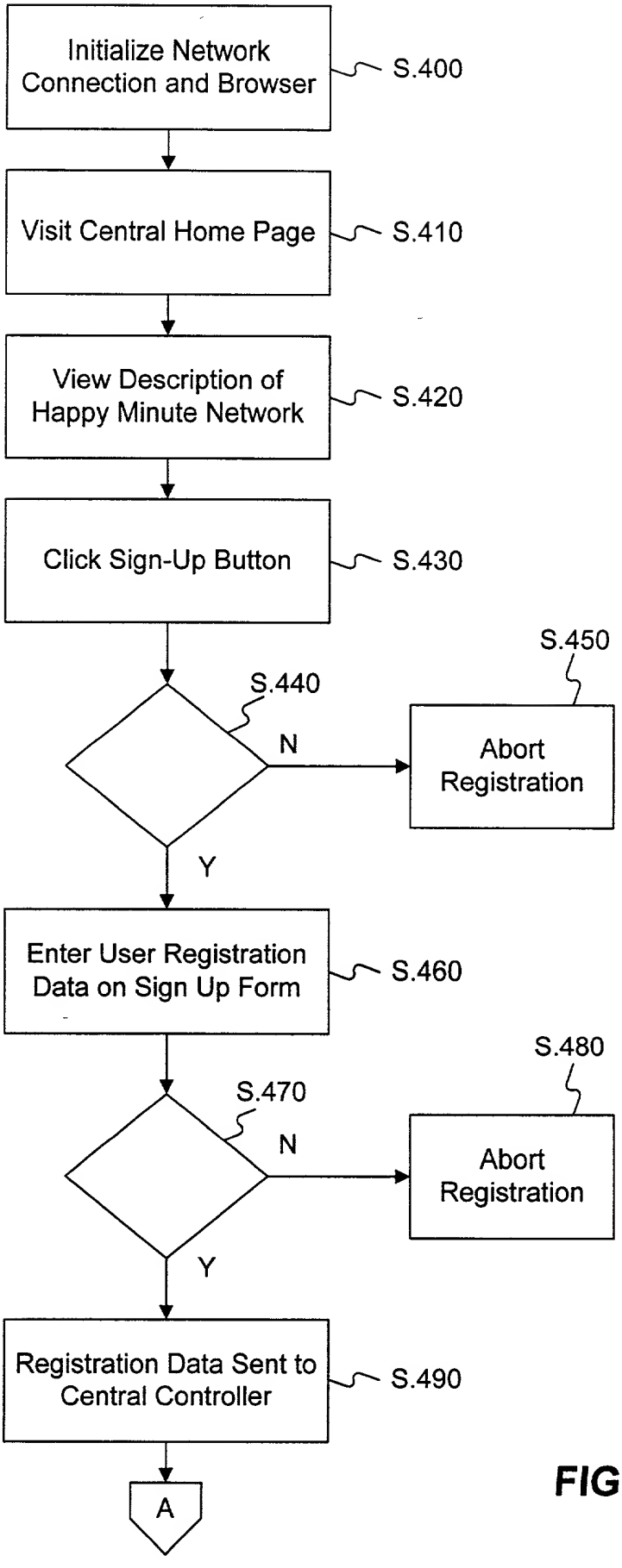
Initialize Network Connection and Browser
S.400
Visit Central Home Page
S.410
View Description of Happy Minute Network
S.420
Click Sign-Up Button
S.430
S.440
N
S.450
Abort Registration
Y
Enter User Registration Data on Sign Up Form
S.460
S.470
N
S.480
Abort Registration
Y
Registration Data Sent to Central Controller
S.490
A

FIG. 24a

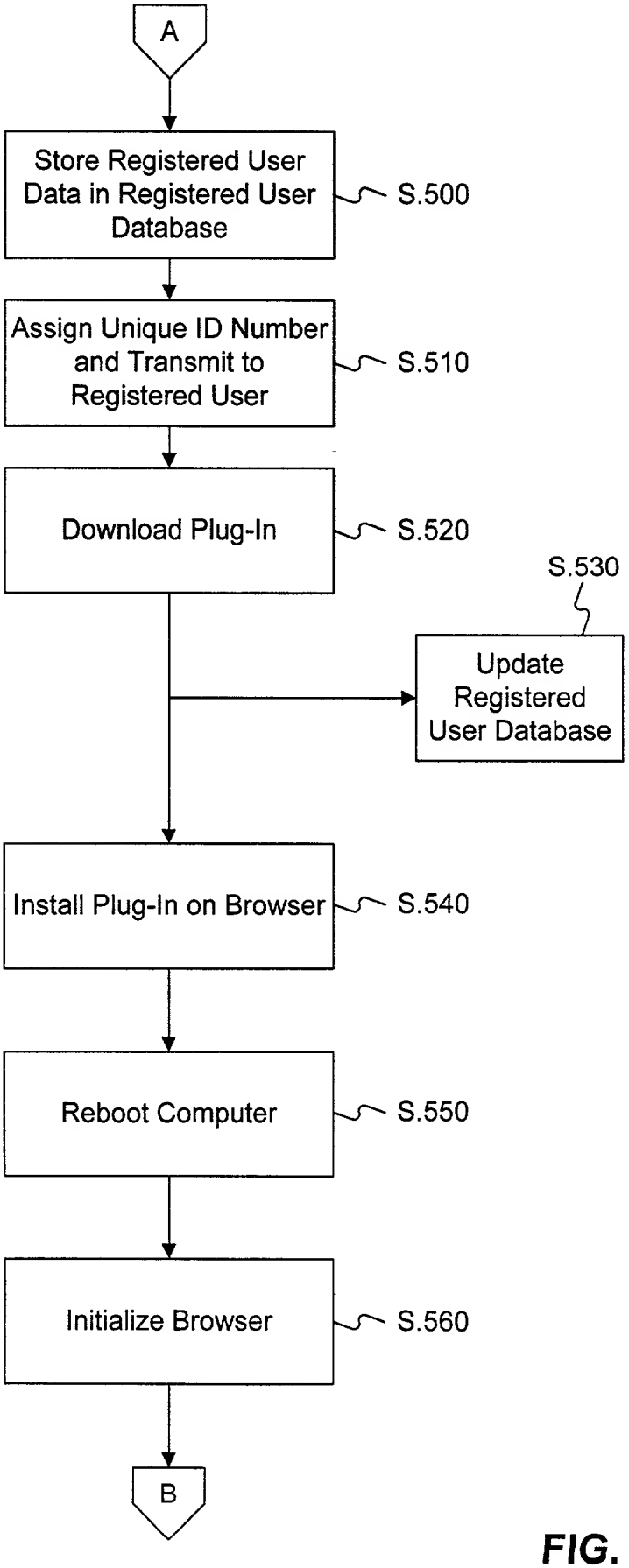
A
Store Registered User Data in Registered User Database
S.500
Assign Unique ID Number and Transmit to Registered User
S.510
Download Plug-In
S.520
S.530
Update Registered User Database
Install Plug-In on Browser
S.540
Reboot Computer
S.550
Initialize Browser
S.560
B

FIG. 24b

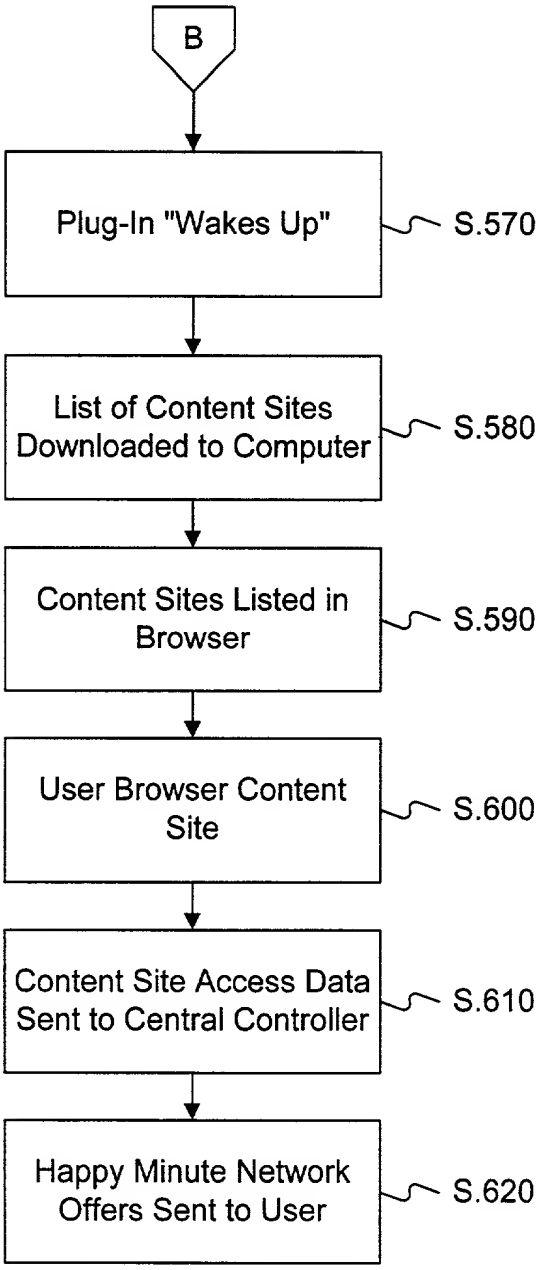
B
Plug-In "Wakes Up"
S.570
List of Content Sites Downloaded to Computer
S.580
Content Sites Listed in Browser
S.590
User Browser Content Site
S.600
Content Site Access Data Sent to Central Controller
S.610
Happy Minute Network Offers Sent to User
S.620

FIG. 24c